

# interzone

OCTOBER 1999

Number 148

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## 'Border Guards'

Greg Egan

plus stories by  
**Jamie Barras**  
**Stephen Dedman**  
**Kim Newman**  
**Robert Reed**  
**Don Webb**



**JAMES HERBERT** interview • **NICK LOWE** on *The Phantom Menace*



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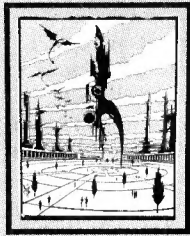
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# interzone

science fiction & fantasy

OCTOBER 1999

Number 148

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Dear Editors:

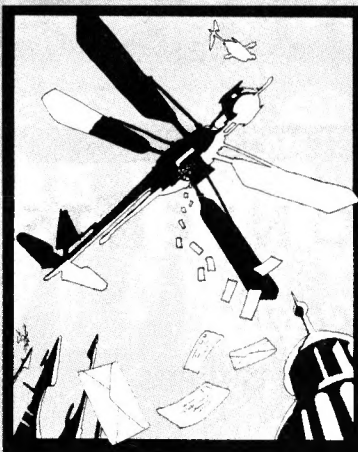
I've just finished *Interzone* #146, and it's been a complete delight from beginning to end, easily the strongest issue so far this year. A really good selection of stories, with plenty of variety, and a striking sense of optimism. It feels a bit unfair to pick favourites, but I especially enjoyed the Kate Orman and Peter Friend stories, and I thought "Captain Starlight and the Flying Saucer" hit just the right ebullient closing note.

After reading Adrian Fry's letter ("A Prop to Mediocrity?" in issue 144), I found myself in two minds. On the one hand, I don't think that it's possible to cast an objective eye over the history of sf without deciding that the pulps, and the subsequent invention of the term "science fiction," were A Bad Thing. Whilst there was no stigma attached to reading Wells or Stapledon, there certainly was a stigma attached to reading *Astounding* and its ilk, and much of that stigma was brought on the genre by itself. The pulp editors had little feel for style, and their prudishness prevented sf developing in a meaningful, adult way. Essentially, pulp magazines propped up bad writing, and stifled good writers. I feel there's something emblematic in the fact that whilst Raymond Chandler was re-inventing detective fiction, and coincidentally writing some of the best prose in the English language, in his novels and in *Black Mask*, the great hero of the pulps was E. E. "Doc" Smith. And like Mr Fry, I couldn't honestly give a fig about John Campbell's editorship of *Astounding Stories*, or Ralph Gernsback's unreadable non-prose.

On the other hand, I can't help but feel Mr Fry is being a bit overwrought. It's now the 1990s, and in my experience, most people – contrary to media hype – don't feel that an interest in sf is at all abnormal. They just see it as a genre, a label which is intrinsically neutral. In other words, whether they know it or not, they apply Sturgeon's Law – 90% of everything is crap, the trick is to find the good stuff. A genre label simply helps to organize a shop, which helps the buyer find his or her way around. As a previous correspondent has said, if you entered a record shop and simply found all the CDs piled in the middle of the room, shopping would be too much of a chore to bother with. If you take genre labels more seriously than that, I see it as entirely your problem. As a free-willed adult, I have enough self-esteem to look in whatever section of the bookshop I think might hold a book of interest, be it sf, crime, politics or gay erotica. If people have a problem with what I choose to read, then that's exactly what it is – their problem. Perhaps Mr Fry would be happier if he bought his books by mail order in a plain brown wrapper.

There have always been good writers who were outside the genre, and good

## INTERACTION



ones within. And good writers often operate across genre boundaries. Mr Fry cites Wells, Kafka, Ballard and Borges, but you could just as easily cite Bester, Delany, Ellison and Silverberg, who are all at the centre of sf as a genre, and easily the visionary equals of his chic (and safe) "outsiders."

When asked if *In a Silent Way* was still jazz, Miles Davis replied that it didn't matter – it was just a "direction in music." Of course, he meant that genres are artificial, really there is only the ocean of music. Likewise, the debate over whether something is "genre sf" or not is totally artificial and also about as interesting as "bald men disputing ownership of a comb." There are only directions in fiction, and just as you don't judge jazz by the fat blokes who play Dixieland at a village fete, it seems counter-productive to write off sf simply because not all of it is as good as J. G. Ballard.

By coincidence, in the very week I read Mr Fry's letter, I finally obtained a complete set of *Dangerous Visions*, and in his introduction Harlan Ellison bullishly claims that the barriers between regular literature and speculative fiction are finally coming down. That was in 1967, so clearly this debate will run and run, but I think Ellison was right, even if the literary establishment doesn't quite realize it yet. In 1999, the world is so science-fictional, what with GM crops, cloning, the ISS, global warming and random wars of corporate imperialism that only speculative fiction can really cope with it. The success of Jeff Noon, Michael Marshall Smith, Iain Banks, *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix*, *Red Dwarf*, *The X-Files* and *2000AD* makes me think that Harlan and myself are right. The gap between speculative and mainstream fiction is collapsing (regardless of their literary merits, look at the success of Crichton, Philip Kerr and Robert Harris) with the result that sf might well be turning into something Arthur C. Clarke perhaps wouldn't call

"science fiction" at all. Is this a bad thing? I don't necessarily think so; to all things there is a season.

Before I go, I've just got to say that I really like the new format of *Interzone*. It's a very comfortable size to handle, and the typefaces and logos are all splendidly clear and easy on the eye (I like the black and white logo used on the contents page by the way). The illustrations are invariably excellent, too. Although I've stated a preference for SMS in the past – and I do rate his work very highly – I feel that's a little unfair to Dominic Harman, whose work this year has been consistently topnotch (I especially liked his illustrations for "Hunting the Slarque"). On the whole, the quality of the stories has been excellent, too, although, inevitably, a few failed to float my boat. Even so, it's going to be quite a job picking my year's best, already.

A real high point of this year has been the non-fiction; I especially enjoyed the interviews with Jeff Noon, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Don Webb and Terry Dowling, and the "featurette" on Greek and Portuguese sf. Sean McMullen's piece, "The British Benchmark," in issue 146 was also a great pleasure, and complemented Tom Arden's book reviews nicely. After reading Paul J. McAuley's review of Canadian writers which followed this, I couldn't help but think that *Interzone's* next special edition should be an all-Canadian affair. Perhaps an idea for the future?

**Sefton Disney**

Taunton, Somerset

**Editor:** An interesting letter, thanks. No space for much of a response, except to say that your ideas about the pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s may be a little confused. Raymond Chandler was a pulp writer (as was Dashiell Hammett before him), and *Black Mask* was a pulp magazine. E. E. "Doc" Smith was hardly the be-all and end-all of the pulp science-fiction magazines founded by Hugo (not Ralph) Gernsback. Weinbaum, Heinlein, Asimov, Sturgeon, even the early Bradbury and Clarke, were all pulp writers too. Although *Astounding SF* ceased to be a pulp in 1943, when it went to "digest" size, the pulp magazines in general lingered on until the early 1950s, and they published much good work among the bad and run-of-the-mill.

Dear Editors:

I must say that I read and enjoyed nearly all of the stories in the Australia issue – normally I only read two or three stories. I read the first few lines of each story, and if it grabs me, I carry on; if not, I only read on if I like the author, or after scanning some more of the story I can see some stuff I like, and the pictures are not too cover-of-American-pulp-magazine-y. Nearly all of the Australia stories grabbed me instantly, with my preferences as follows:



"Stormy Weather" (Peter Friend)  
 "Teddy Cat" (Catherine McMullen) –  
 couple of minor flaws, but great idea  
 and well carried  
 "Captain Starlight and the Flying Saucer"  
 (Ivan Jurisevic) –  
 delightfully irreverent  
 "New Words of Power" (Sean McMullen) –  
 culture clash  
 "The Bicycle Net" (Kate Orman) – nice  
 cameo from a post-apocalyptic future  
 "The View in Nancy's Window"  
 (Terry Dowling)  
 "The Military Industrial Complexion"  
 (Anthony Morris) – Jeff Noon crossed  
 with Octavia Butler and Geoff Ryman  
 I couldn't read "the little ones" (Robert  
 N. Stephenson) – sorry! but when I  
 started reading it I just didn't like any  
 of the ideas and could see the point to  
 be made, but didn't want to follow it.

**Martin L. V. Jenkins**  
 Bristol

## Film Critic Grumbles

Dear Editors:

So why isn't there a piece on Australian science-fiction film in the latest *IZ* (issue 146)? Surely, it's been more influential than Australian written sf? The *Mad Max* movies alone reshaped the end-of-the-world genre, and what about *The Cars That Ate Paris*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Razorback*, *Dark City*, *The Matrix*, *The Last Wave*, etc?

I'm also always disappointed when the film column is dropped, since it's the first thing I read, and this was the month I was looking forward to Nick Lowe on *The Phantom Menace*.

**Kim Newman**  
 London

**Editor:** Your latter wish is granted this issue, Kim. And thanks for your Edgar Allan Poe story, also herein.

**Paul Brazier responds:** I agree about Australian sf film. However, what I was trying to achieve was a celebration of the diversity of current Australian written sf. As editor, I decided to hold over Nick Lowe's column both because it wasn't relevant, and because I wanted to use the space for Catherine McMullen's story.

## An SF Child Prodigy?

**Editor:** I e-mailed Sean McMullen in Australia to ask him more about his daughter Catherine (who had a story, "Teddy Cat," in *Interzone* 146). Paul Brazier takes editorial credit for "discovering" Catherine, since he was the guest-editor of that special Australian issue of the magazine and he chose all the stories. Although he knew she was a child, Paul was uncertain of Catherine's exact age, so I put the question to her father, and this was his reply:

Dear David:

Catherine turns 11 on September 19th. A couple of weeks before that she will become the only professional sf author to attend the 1999 World SF Convention as a child-in-tow. She may even be the first-ever professional sf author to attend a Worldcon as a child-in-tow.

Catherine was 7 when she wrote her first story – "Spider", as I recall. That one is unpublished. She was 9 years 11 months when she wrote her first (amateur) published story, "Sea Baby". That was entered in the Acorn Books national short story competition, and she came equal third in her division. It was published by Acorn in an amateur anthology called *A Drop of Imagination* in February 1999, by which time she was 10 years and 5 months. It was sf in theme. She attended the launch, did signings, and has given three readings.

She wrote "Teddy Cat" in November 1998, aged 10 years and 2 months. It is her second published story, but her first professional story. As it was in the August 1999 issue, she was 10 years and 11 months when it was published. After watching some TV doco on genetic engineering we had talked about cloning. She asked about cloning a teddy bear. I pointed out that you would get the species that originally grew the skin or hair, probably a sheep or rabbit. She took the idea away and wrote the story.

Later that week she asked me to run some game on my PC, as her laptop did not have enough memory. After watching my system crash I said "Sorry kid, it took one look at that game and shat itself." I'd meant to say something more polite but I was tired and... next thing I knew the expression was in her story. After I saw the first draft I corrected a few scientific inaccuracies (there were

never any sabre-toothed tigers in Australia, for example), but that was my only involvement. I have actually given people like George Turner and Terry Dowling the same sort of technical advice for their stories, so I consider the story to be genuinely hers.

She entered it in a local competition – which promptly folded without posting a result. Paul Brazier asked to see an example of her fiction, so in January 1999 I e-mailed "Teddy Cat" over. Paul e-mailed us back and said *Interzone* would like it. She was then 10 years and 4 months. You know the rest.

I kept a tally of the books Catherine read in 1997 when she was 7/8 years old. It came to 1,040 books! The shortest was *Fluffy Rabbit Stories* or something like that, at 30 pages. The longest was *Lord of the Rings*, which took her three weeks and during which she read several other books for light relief. The average length of the books was around 140 pages, and her comprehension was pretty good. She is now 10 years and 11 months. About three weeks ago we took her to someone's birthday. She took three books in case she got bored – which she did. Two were McCaffrey's Pern books, the other was by Pratchett, *Equal Rites*, if I remember correctly. In five hours she had read both McCaffrey books and was about a third of the way into the Pratchett. She is also an enthusiastic fan of *Babylon 5*, and a fanatical fan of *Red Dwarf*. She hates *Star Trek* about as intensely as vampires reputedly hate crucifixes. When Neil Gaiman met her last year in New Zealand (Neil and I were guests at a con there) he wrote in one of her books, "To Catherine, the oldest 9-years-old in the world."

This is nothing to do with your question, but in 1996 she also made her first scientific discovery: she found a marsupial lion's tooth about half the size of a mobile phone in a limestone cave in South Australia. The scientist on duty was pretty surprised when she turned it in. Oddly enough, English is not her best subject: it's mathematics.

**Sean McMullen**  
 Melbourne

**Editor:** Astonishing! Eminent anthologist and sf magazine expert Mike Ashley commented as follows, after reading Catherine's story and Sean's remarks, above.

Dear David:

At last having got on top of my post-holiday filing, I found the August issue of *Interzone* and young Catherine McMullen's "Teddy Cat." Yikes, if I could have written like that at ten I would have been very proud. And a great idea. Now let's see that talent grow and prosper.

**Mike Ashley**  
 Chatham, Kent



Catherine McMullen

Photo: Paul Brazier





# BORDER GUARDS


Greg Egan

In the early afternoon of his fourth day out of sadness, Jamil was wandering home from the gardens at the centre of Noether when he heard shouts from the playing field behind the library. On the spur of the moment, without even asking the city what game was in progress, he decided to join in.

As he rounded the corner and the field came into view, it was clear from the movements of the players that they were in the middle of a quantum soccer match. At Jamil's request, the city painted the wave function of the hypothetical ball across his vision, and tweaked him to recognize the players as the members of two teams without changing their appearance at all. Maria had once told him that she always chose a literal perception of colour-coded clothing instead; she had no desire to use pathways that had evolved for the sake of sorting people into those you defended and those you slaughtered. But almost everything that had been bequeathed to them was stained with blood, and to Jamil it seemed a far sweeter victory to adapt the worst relics to his own ends than to discard them as irretrievably tainted.

The wave function appeared as a vivid auroral light, a quicksilver plasma bright enough to be distinct in the afternoon sunlight, yet unable to dazzle the eye or conceal the players running through it. Bands of colour representing the complex phase of the wave swept across the field, parting to wash over separate rising lobes of probability before hitting the boundary and bouncing back again, inverted. The match was being played by the oldest, simplest rules: semi-classical, non-relativistic. The ball was confined to the field by an infinitely high barrier, so there was no question of it tunnelling out, leaking away as the match progressed. The players were treated classi-





cally: their movements pumped energy into the wave, enabling transitions from the game's opening state – with the ball spread thinly across the entire field – into the range of higher-energy modes needed to localize it. But localization was fleeting; there was no point forming a nice sharp wave packet in the middle of the field in the hope of kicking it around like a classical object. You had to shape the wave in such a way that all of its modes – cycling at different frequencies, travelling with different velocities – would come into phase with each other, for a fraction of a second, within the goal itself. Achieving that was a matter of energy levels, and timing.

Jamil had noticed that one team was under-strength. The umpire would be skewing the field's potential to keep the match fair, but a new participant would be especially welcome for the sake of restoring symmetry. He watched the faces of the players, most of them old friends. They were frowning with concentration, but breaking now and then into smiles of delight at their small successes, or their opponents' ingenuity.

He was badly out of practice, but if he turned out to be dead weight he could always withdraw. And if he misjudged his skills, and lost the match with his incompetence? No one would care. The score was nil all; he could wait for a goal, but that might be an hour or more in coming. Jamil communed with the umpire, and discovered that the players had decided in advance to allow new entries at any time.

Before he could change his mind, he announced himself. The wave froze, and he ran on to the field. People nodded greetings, mostly making no fuss, though Ezequiel shouted, "Welcome back!" Jamil suddenly felt fragile again; though he'd ended his long seclusion four days before, it was well within his power, still, to be dismayed by everything the game would involve. His recovery felt like a finely balanced optical illusion, a figure and ground that could change roles in an instant, a solid cube that could evert into a hollow.

**D.E.H. '99**



The umpire guided him to his allotted starting position, opposite a woman he hadn't seen before. He offered her a formal bow, and she returned the gesture. This was no time for introductions, but he asked the city if she'd published a name. She had: Margit.

The umpire counted down in their heads. Jamil tensed, regretting his impulsiveness. For seven years he'd been dead to the world. After four days back, what was he good for? His muscles were incapable of atrophy, his reflexes could never be dulled, but he'd chosen to live with an unconstrained will, and at any moment his wavering resolve could desert him.

The umpire said, "Play." The frozen light around Jamil came to life, and he sprang into motion.

Each player was responsible for a set of modes, particular harmonics of the wave that were theirs to fill, guard, or deplete as necessary. Jamil's twelve modes cycled at between 1,000 and 1,250 milliHertz. The rules of the game endowed his body with a small, fixed potential energy, which repelled the ball slightly and allowed different modes to push and pull on each other through him, but if he stayed in one spot as the modes cycled, every influence he exerted would eventually be replaced by its opposite, and the effect would simply cancel itself out.

To drive the wave from one mode to another, you needed to move, and to drive it efficiently you needed to exploit the way the modes fell in and out of phase with each other: to take from a 1,000 milliHertz mode and give to a 1,250, you had to act in synch with the quarter-Hertz beat between them. It was like pushing a child's swing at its natural frequency, but rather than setting a single child in motion, you were standing between two swings and acting more as an intermediary: trying to time your interventions in such a way as to speed up one child at the other's expense. The way you pushed on the wave at a given time and place was out of your hands completely, but by changing location in just the right way you could gain control over the interaction. Every pair of modes had a spatial beat between them – like the moiré pattern formed by two sheets of woven fabric held up to the light together, shifting from transparent to opaque as the gaps between the threads fell in and out of alignment. Slicing through this cyclic landscape offered the perfect means to match the accompanying chronological beat.

Jamil sprinted across the field at a speed and angle calculated to drive two favourable transitions at once. He'd gauged the current spectrum of the wave instinctively, watching from the sidelines, and he knew which of the modes in his charge would contribute to a goal and which would detract from the probability. As he cut through the shimmering bands of colour, the umpire gave him tactile feedback to supplement his visual estimates and calculations, allowing him to sense the difference between a cyclic tug, a to and fro that came to nothing, and the gentle but persistent force that meant he was successfully riding the beat.

Chusok called out to him urgently, "Take, take! Two-ten!" Everyone's spectral territory overlapped with someone else's, and you needed to pass amplitude from player to player as well as trying to manage it within

your own range. *Two-ten* – a harmonic with two peaks across the width of the field and ten along its length, cycling at 1,160 milliHertz – was filling up as Chusok drove unwanted amplitude from various lower-energy modes into it. It was Jamil's role to empty it, putting the amplitude somewhere useful. Any mode with an even number of peaks across the field was unfavourable for scoring, because it had a node – a zero point between the peaks – smack in the middle of both goals.

Jamil acknowledged the request with a hand signal and shifted his trajectory. It was almost a decade since he'd last played the game, but he still knew the intricate web of possibilities by heart: he could drain the two-ten harmonic into the three-ten, five-two and five-six modes – all with "good parity", peaks along the centre-line – in a single action.

As he pounded across the grass, carefully judging the correct angle by sight, increasing his speed until he felt the destructive beats give way to a steady force like a constant breeze, he suddenly recalled a time – centuries before, in another city – when he'd played with one team, week after week, for 40 years. Faces and voices swam in his head. Hashim, Jamil's 98th child, and Hashim's granddaughter Laila had played beside him. But he'd burnt his house and moved on, and when that era touched him at all now it was like an unexpected gift. The scent of the grass, the shouts of the players, the soles of his feet striking the ground, resonated with every other moment he'd spent the same way, bridging the centuries, binding his life together. He never truly felt the scale of it when he sought it out deliberately; it was always small things, tightly focused moments like this, that burst the horizon of his everyday concerns and confronted him with the astonishing vista.

The two-ten mode was draining faster than he'd expected; the see-sawing centre-line dip in the wave was vanishing before his eyes. He looked around, and saw Margit performing an elaborate Lissajous manoeuvre, smoothly orchestrating a dozen transitions at once. Jamil froze and watched her, admiring her virtuosity while he tried to decide what to do next; there was no point competing with her when she was doing such a good job of completing the task Chusok had set him.

Margit was his opponent, but they were both aiming for exactly the same kind of spectrum. The symmetry of the field meant that any scoring wave would work equally well for either side – but only one team could be the first to reap the benefit, the first to have more than half the wave's probability packed into their goal. So the two teams were obliged to co-operate at first, and it was only as the wave took shape from their combined efforts that it gradually became apparent which side would gain by sculpting it to perfection as rapidly as possible, and which would gain by spoiling it for the first chance, then honing it for the rebound.

Penina chided him over her shoulder as she jogged past, "You want to leave her to clean up four-six, as well?" She was smiling, but Jamil was stung; he'd been motionless for ten or fifteen seconds. It was not forbidden to drag your feet and rely on your opponents to do all the work, but it was regarded as a shamefully impoverished strategy. It was also very risky, handing



them the opportunity to set up a wave that was almost impossible to exploit yourself.

He reassessed the spectrum, and quickly sorted through the alternatives. Whatever he did would have unwanted side effects; there was no magic way to avoid influencing modes in other players' territory, and any action that would drive the transitions he needed would also trigger a multitude of others, up and down the spectrum. Finally, he made a choice that would weaken the offending mode while causing as little disruption as possible.

Jamil immersed himself in the game, planning each transition two steps in advance, switching strategy halfway through a run if he had to, but staying in motion until the sweat dripped from his body, until his calves burned, until his blood sang. He wasn't blinded to the raw pleasures of the moment, or to memories of games past, but he let them wash over him, like the breeze that rose up and cooled his skin with no need for acknowledgement. Familiar voices shouted terse commands at him; as the wave came closer to a scoring spectrum every trace of superfluous conversation vanished, every idle glance gave way to frantic, purposeful gestures. To a bystander, this might have seemed like the height of dehumanization: 22 people reduced to grunting cogs in a pointless machine. Jamil smiled at the thought but refused to be distracted into a complicated imaginary rebuttal. Every step he took was the answer to that, every hoarse plea to Yann or Joracy, Chusok or Maria, Eudore or Halide. These were his friends, and he was back among them. Back in the world.

The first chance of a goal was 30 seconds away, and the opportunity would fall to Jamil's team; a few tiny shifts in amplitude would clinch it. Margit kept her distance, but Jamil could sense her eyes on him constantly – and literally feel her at work through his skin as she slackened his contact with the wave. In theory, by mirroring your opponent's movements at the correct position on the field you could undermine everything they did, though in practice not even the most skilful team could keep the spectrum completely frozen. Going further and spoiling was a tug of war you didn't want to win too well: if you degraded the wave too much, your opponent's task – spoiling your own subsequent chance at a goal – became far easier.

Jamil still had two bad-parity modes that he was hoping to weaken, but every time he changed velocity to try a new transition, Margit responded in an instant, blocking him. He gestured to Chusok for help; Chusok had his own problems with Ezequiel, but he could still make trouble for Margit by choosing where he placed unwanted amplitude. Jamil shook sweat out of his eyes; he could see the characteristic "stepping stone" pattern of lobes forming, a sign that the wave would soon converge on the goal, but from the middle of the field it was impossible to judge their shape accurately enough to know what, if anything, remained to be done.

Suddenly, Jamil felt the wave push against him. He didn't waste time looking around for Margit; Chusok must have succeeded in distracting her. He was almost at the boundary line, but he managed to reverse smoothly, continuing to drive both the transitions he'd

been aiming for.

Two long lobes of probability, each modulated by a series of oscillating mounds, raced along the sides of the field. A third, shorter lobe running along the centre-line melted away, reappeared, then merged with the others as they touched the end of the field, forming an almost rectangular plateau encompassing the goal.

The plateau became a pillar of light, growing narrower and higher as dozens of modes, all finally in phase, crashed together against the impenetrable barrier of the field's boundary. A shallow residue was still spread across the entire field, and a diminishing sequence of elliptical lobes trailed away from the goal like a staircase, but most of the wave that had started out lapping around their waists was now concentrated in a single peak that towered above their heads, nine or ten metres tall.

For an instant, it was motionless.

Then it began to fall.

The umpire said, "Forty-nine point eight."

The wave packet had not been tight enough.

Jamil struggled to shrug off his disappointment and throw his instincts into reverse. The other team had 50 seconds, now, to fine-tune the spectrum and ensure that the reflected packet was just a fraction narrower when it reformed, at the opposite end of the field.

As the pillar collapsed, replaying its synthesis in reverse, Jamil caught sight of Margit. She smiled at him calmly, and it suddenly struck him: *She'd known they couldn't make the goal. That was why she'd stopped opposing him.* She'd let him work towards sharpening the wave for a few seconds, knowing that it was already too late for him, knowing that her own team would gain from the slight improvement.

Jamil was impressed; it took an extraordinary level of skill and confidence to do what she'd just done. For all the time he'd spent away, he knew exactly what to expect from the rest of the players, and in Margit's absence he would probably have been wishing out loud for a talented newcomer to make the game interesting again. Still, it was hard not to feel a slight sting of resentment. Someone should have warned him just how good she was.

With the modes slipping out of phase, the wave undulated all over the field again, but its reconvergence was inevitable: unlike a wave of water or sound, it possessed no hidden degrees of freedom to grind its precision into entropy. Jamil decided to ignore Margit; there were cruder strategies than mirror-blocking that worked almost as well. Chusok was filling the two-ten mode now; Jamil chose the four-six as his spoiler. All they had to do was keep the wave from growing much sharper, and it didn't matter whether they achieved this by preserving the status quo, or by nudging it from one kind of bluntness to another.

The steady resistance he felt as he ran told Jamil that he was driving the transition, unblocked, but he searched in vain for some visible sign of success. When he reached a vantage point where he could take in enough of the field in one glance to judge the spectrum properly, he noticed a rapidly vibrating shimmer across the width of the wave.

He counted nine peaks: good parity. Margit had pulled most of the amplitude straight out of his spoiler mode and fed it into *this*. It was a mad waste of energy to aim for such an elevated harmonic, but no one had been looking there, no one had stopped her.

The scoring pattern was forming again, he only had nine or ten seconds left to make up for all the time he'd wasted. Jamil chose the strongest good-parity mode in his territory, and the emptiest bad one, computed the velocity that would link them, and ran.

He didn't dare turn to watch the opposition goal; he didn't want to break his concentration. The wave retreated around his feet, less like an Earthly ebb tide than an ocean drawn into the sky by a passing black hole. The city diligently portrayed the shadow that his body would have cast, shrinking in front of him as the tower of light rose.

The verdict was announced. "Fifty point one."

The air was filled with shouts of triumph – Ezequiel's the loudest, as always. Jamil sagged to his knees, laughing. It was a curious feeling, familiar as it was: he cared, and he didn't. If he'd been wholly indifferent to the outcome of the game there would have been no pleasure in it, but obsessing over every defeat – or every victory – could ruin it just as thoroughly. He could almost see himself walking the line, orchestrating his response as carefully as any action in the game itself.

He lay down on the grass to catch his breath before play resumed. The outer face of the microsun that orbited Laplace was shielded with rock, but light reflected skywards from the land beneath it crossed the 100,000 kilometre width of the 3-toroidal universe to give a faint glow to the planet's night side. Though only a sliver was lit directly, Jamil could discern the full disc of the opposite hemisphere in the primary image at the zenith: continents and oceans that lay, by a shorter route, 12,000 or so kilometres beneath him. Other views in the lattice of images spread across the sky were from different angles, and showed substantial crescents of the dayside itself. The one thing you couldn't find in any of these images, even with a telescope, was your own city. The topology of this universe let you see the back of your head, but never your reflection.

Jamil's team lost, three nil. He staggered over to the fountains at the edge of the field and slaked his thirst, shocked by the pleasure of the simple act. Just to be alive was glorious now, but once he felt this way, anything seemed possible. He was back in synch, back in phase, and he was going to make the most of it, for however long it lasted.

He caught up with the others, who'd headed down towards the river. Ezequiel hooked an arm around his neck, laughing. "Bad luck, Sleeping Beauty! You picked the wrong time to wake. With Margit, we're invincible."

Jamil ducked free of him. "I won't argue with that." He looked around. "Speaking of whom –"

Penina said, "Gone home. She plays, that's all. No frivolous socializing after the match."

Chusok added, "Or any other time." Penina shot Jamil a glance that meant: not for want of trying on

Chusok's part.

Jamil pondered this, wondering why it annoyed him so much. On the field, she hadn't come across as aloof and superior. Just unashamedly good.

He queried the city, but she'd published nothing besides her name. Nobody expected – or wished – to hear more than the tiniest fraction of another person's history, but it was rare for anyone to start a new life without carrying through something from the old as a kind of calling card, some incident or achievement from which your new neighbours could form an impression of you.

They'd reached the riverbank. Jamil pulled his shirt over his head. "So what's her story? She must have told you something."

Ezequiel said, "Only that she learnt to play a long time ago; she won't say where or when. She arrived in Noether at the end of last year, and grew a house on the southern outskirts. No one sees her around much. No one even knows what she studies."

Jamil shrugged, and waded in. "Ah well. It's a challenge to rise to." Penina laughed and splashed him teasingly. He protested, "I *meant* beating her at the game."

Chusok said wryly, "When you turned up, I thought you'd be our secret weapon. The one player she didn't know inside out already."

"I'm glad you didn't tell me that. I would have turned around and fled straight back into hibernation."

"I know. That's why we all kept quiet." Chusok smiled. "Welcome back."

Penina said, "Yeah, welcome back, Jamil."

Sunlight shone on the surface of the river. Jamil ached all over, but the cool water was the perfect place to be. If he wished, he could build a partition in his mind at the point where he stood right now, and never fall beneath it. Other people lived that way, and it seemed to cost them nothing. Contrast was overrated; no sane person spent half their time driving spikes into their flesh for the sake of feeling better when they stopped. Ezequiel lived every day with the happy boisterousness of a five-year-old; Jamil sometimes found this annoying, but then any kind of disposition would irritate someone. His own stretches of meaningless sombreness weren't exactly a boon to his friends.

Chusok said, "I've invited everyone to a meal at my house tonight. Will you come?"

Jamil thought it over, then shook his head. He still wasn't ready. He couldn't force-feed himself with normality; it didn't speed his recovery, it just drove him backwards.

Chusok looked disappointed, but there was nothing to be done about that. Jamil promised him, "Next time. OK?"

Ezequiel sighed. "What are we going to do with you? You're worse than Margit!" Jamil started backing away, but it was too late. Ezequiel reached him in two casual strides, bent down and grabbed him around the waist, hoisted him effortlessly onto one shoulder, then flung him through the air into the depths of the river.

Jamil was woken by the scent of wood smoke. His room was still filled with the night's grey shadows, but when



he propped himself up on one elbow and the window obliged him with transparency, the city was etched clearly in the predawn light.

He dressed and left the house, surprised at the coolness of the dew on his feet. No one else in his street seemed to be up; had they failed to notice the smell, or did they already know to expect it? He turned a corner and saw the rising column of soot, faintly lit with red from below. The flames and the ruins were still hidden from him, but he knew whose house it was.

When he reached the dying blaze, he crouched in the heat-withered garden, cursing himself. Chusok had offered him the chance to join him for his last meal in Noether. Whatever hints you

dropped, it was customary to tell no one that you were moving on. If you still had a lover, if you still had young children, you never deserted them. But friends, you warned in subtle ways. Before vanishing.

Jamil covered his head with his arms. He'd lived through this countless times before, but it never became easier. If anything it grew worse, as every departure was weighted with the memories of others. His brothers and sisters had scattered across the branches of the New Territories. He'd walked away from his father and mother when he was too young and confident to realize how much it would hurt him, decades later. His own children had all abandoned him eventually, far more often than he'd left them. It was easier to leave an ex-lover than a grown child: something burned itself out in a couple, almost naturally, as if ancestral biology had prepared them for at least that one rift.

Jamil stopped fighting the tears. But as he brushed them away, he caught sight of someone standing beside him. He looked up. It was Margit.

He felt a need to explain. He rose to his feet and addressed her. "This was Chusok's house. We were good friends. I'd known him for 96 years."

Margit gazed back at him neutrally. "Boo hoo. Poor baby. You'll never see your friend again."

Jamil almost laughed, her rudeness was so surreal. He pushed on, as if the only conceivable, polite response was

to pretend that he hadn't heard her. "No one is the kindest, the most generous, the most loyal. It doesn't matter. That's not the point. Everyone's unique. Chusok was Chusok." He banged a fist against his chest, utterly heedless now of her contemptuous words. "There's a hole in me, and it will never be filled." That was the truth, even though he'd grow around it. *He should have gone to the meal, it would have cost him nothing.*

"You must be a real emotional Swiss cheese," observed Margit tartly.

Jamil came to his senses. "Why don't you fuck off to some other universe? No one wants you in Noether."

Margit was amused. "You are a bad loser."

Jamil gazed at her, honestly confused for a moment; the game had slipped his mind completely. He gestured at the embers. "What are you doing here? Why did you follow the smoke, if it wasn't regret at not saying goodbye to him when you had the chance?" He wasn't sure how seriously to take Penina's light-hearted insinuation, but if Chusok had fallen for Margit, and it had not been reciprocated, that might even have been the reason he'd left.

She shook her head calmly. "He was nothing to me. I barely spoke to him."

"Well, that's your loss."

"From the look of things, I'd say the loss was all yours."

He had no reply. Margit turned and walked away.

Jamil crouched on the ground again, rocking back and forth, waiting for the pain to subside.

Jamil spent the next week preparing to resume his studies. The library had near-instantaneous contact with every artificial universe in the New Territories, and the additional lightspeed lag between Earth and the point in space from which the whole tree-structure blossomed was only a few hours. Jamil had been to Earth, but only as a tourist; land was scarce, they accepted no migrants. There were remote planets you could live on, in the home universe, but you had to be a certain kind of masochistic purist to want that. The precise reasons why his ancestors had entered the New Territories had been forgotten generations before – and it would have



been presumptuous to track them down and ask them in person – but given a choice between the then even-more-crowded Earth, the horrifying reality of interstellar distances, and an endlessly extensible branching chain of worlds which could be traversed within a matter of weeks, the decision wasn't exactly baffling.

Jamil had devoted most of his time in Noether to studying the category of representations of Lie groups on complex vector spaces – a fitting choice, since Emmy Noether had been a pioneer of group theory, and if she'd lived to see this field blossom she would probably have been in the thick of it herself. Representations of Lie groups lay behind most of physics: each kind of subatomic particle was really nothing but a particular way of representing the universal symmetry group as a set of rotations of complex vectors. Organizing this kind of structure with category theory was ancient knowledge, but Jamil didn't care; he'd long ago reconciled himself to being a student, not a discoverer. The greatest gift of consciousness was the ability to take the patterns of the world inside you, and for all that he would have relished the thrill of being the first at anything, with ten-to-the-sixteenth people alive that was a futile ambition for most.

In the library, he spoke with fellow students of his chosen field on other worlds, or read their latest works. Though they were not researchers, they could still put a new pedagogical spin on old material, enriching the connections with other fields, finding ways to make the complex, subtle truth easier to assimilate without sacrificing the depth and detail that made it worth knowing in the first place. They would not advance the frontiers of knowledge. They would not discover new principles of nature, or invent new technologies. But to Jamil, understanding was an end in itself.

He rarely thought about the prospect of playing another match, and when he did the idea was not appealing. With Chusok gone, the same group could play ten-to-a-side without Jamil to skew the numbers. Margit might even choose to swap teams, if only for the sake of proving that her current team's monotonous string of victories really had been entirely down to her.

When the day arrived, though, he found himself unable to stay away. He turned up intending to remain a spectator, but Ryuichi had deserted Ezequiel's team, and everyone begged Jamil to join in.

As he took his place opposite Margit, there was nothing in her demeanour to acknowledge their previous encounter: no lingering contempt, but no hint of shame either. Jamil resolved to put it out of his mind; he owed it to his fellow players to concentrate on the game.

They lost, five nil.

Jamil forced himself to follow everyone to Eudore's house, to celebrate, commiserate, or as it turned out, to forget the whole thing. After they'd eaten, Jamil wandered from room to room, enjoying Eudore's choice of music but unable to settle into any conversation. No one mentioned Chusok in his hearing.

He left just after midnight. Laplace's near-full primary image and its eight brightest gibbous companions lit the streets so well that there was no need for anything more. Jamil thought: Chusok might have merely

travelled to another city, one beneath his gaze right now. And wherever he'd gone, he might yet choose to stay in touch with his friends from Noether.

*And his friends from the next town, and the next?  
Century after century?*

Margit was sitting on Jamil's doorstep, holding a bunch of white flowers in one hand.

Jamil was irritated. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to apologize."

He shrugged. "There's no need. We feel differently about certain things. That's fine. I can still face you on the playing field."

"I'm not apologizing for a difference of opinion. I wasn't honest with you. I was cruel." She shaded her eyes against the glare of the planet and looked up at him. "You were right: it was my loss. I wish I'd known your friend."

He laughed curtly. "Well, it's too late for that."

She said simply, "I know."

Jamil relented. "Do you want to come in?" Margit nodded, and he instructed the door to open for her. As he followed her inside, he said, "How long have you been here? Have you eaten?"

"No."

"I'll cook something for you."

"You don't have to do that."

He called out to her from the kitchen, "Think of it as a peace offering. I don't have any flowers."

Margit replied, "They're not for you. They're for Chusok's house."

Jamil stopped rummaging through his vegetable bins, and walked back into the living room. "People don't usually do that in Noether."

Margit was sitting on the couch, staring at the floor. She said, "I'm so lonely here. I can't bear it any more."

He sat beside her. "Then why did you rebuff him? You could at least have been friends."

She shook her head. "Don't ask me to explain."

Jamil took her hand. She turned and embraced him, trembling miserably. He stroked her hair. "Sssh."

She said, "Just sex. I don't want anything more."

He groaned softly. "There's no such thing as that."

"I just need someone to touch me again."

"I understand." He confessed, "So do I. But that won't be all. So don't ask me to promise there'll be nothing more."

Margit took his face in her hands and kissed him. Her mouth tasted of wood smoke.

Jamil said, "I don't even know you."

"No one knows anyone, any more."

"That's not true."

"No, it's not," she conceded gloomily. She ran a hand lightly along his arm. Jamil wanted badly to see her smile, so he made each dark hair thicken and blossom into a violet flower as it passed beneath her fingers.

She did smile, but she said, "I've seen that trick before."

Jamil was annoyed. "I'm sure to be a disappointment all round, then. I expect you'd be happier with some kind of novelty. A unicorn, or an amoeba."

She laughed. "I don't think so." She took his hand and



placed it against her breast. "Do you ever get tired of sex?"

"Do you ever get tired of breathing?"

"I can go for a long time without thinking about it."

He nodded. "But then one day you stop and fill your lungs with air, and it's still as sweet as ever."

Jamil didn't know what he was feeling any more. Lust. Compassion. Spite. She'd come to him hurting, and he wanted to help her, but he wasn't sure that either of them really believed this would work.

Margit inhaled the scent of the flowers on his arm. "Are they the same colour? Everywhere else?"

He said, "There's only one way to find out."

Jamil woke in the early hours of the morning, alone. He'd half expected Margit to flee like this, but she could have waited till dawn. He would have obligingly feigned sleep while she dressed and tip-toed out.

Then he heard her. It was not a sound he would normally have associated with a human being, but it could not have been anything else.

He found her in the kitchen, curled around a table leg, wailing rhythmically. He stood back and watched her, afraid that anything he did would only make things worse. She met his gaze in the half light, but kept up the mechanical whimper. Her eyes weren't blank; she was not delirious, or hallucinating. She knew exactly who, and where, she was.

Finally, Jamil knelt in the doorway. He said, "Whatever it is, you can tell me. And we'll fix it. We'll find a way."

She bared her teeth. "You can't *fix it*, you stupid child." She resumed the awful noise.

"Then just tell me. Please?" He stretched out a hand towards her. He hadn't felt quite so helpless since his very first daughter, Aminata, had come to him as an inconsolable six-year-old, rejected by the boy to whom she'd declared her undying love. He'd been 24 years old; a child himself. More than a thousand years ago. *Where are you now, Nata?*

Margit said, "I promised. I'd never tell."

"Promised who?"

"Myself."

"Good. They're the easiest kind to break."

She started weeping. It was a more ordinary sound, but it was even more chilling. She was not a wounded animal now, an alien being suffering some incomprehensible pain. Jamil approached her cautiously; she let him wrap his arms around her shoulders.

He whispered, "Come to bed. The warmth will help. Just being held will help."

She spat at him derisively, "It won't bring her back." "Who?"

Margit stared at him in silence, as if he'd said something shocking.

Jamil insisted gently, "Who won't it bring back?" She'd lost a friend, badly, the way he'd lost Chusok. That was why she'd sought him out. He could help her through it. They could help each other through it.

She said, "It won't bring back the dead."

Margit was seven thousand five hundred and ninety-four years old. Jamil persuaded her to sit at the kitchen table. He wrapped her in blankets, then fed her tomatoes and rice, as she told him how she'd witnessed the birth of his world.

The promise had shimmered just beyond reach for decades. Almost none of her contemporaries had believed it would happen, though the truth should have been plain for centuries: *the human body was a material thing*. In time, with enough knowledge and effort, it would become possible to safeguard it from any kind of deterioration, any kind of harm. Stellar evolution and cosmic entropy might or might not prove insurmountable, but there'd be aeons to confront those challenges. In the middle of the 21st century, the hurdles were aging, disease, violence, and an overcrowded planet.

"Grace was my best friend. We were students." Margit smiled. "Before everyone was a student. We'd talk about it, but we didn't believe we'd see it happen. It would come in another century. It would come for our great-great-grandchildren. We'd hold infants on our knees in our twilight years and tell ourselves: *this one will never die*."

"When we were both 22, something happened. To both of us." She lowered her eyes. "We were kidnapped. We were raped. We were tortured."

Jamil didn't know how to respond. These were just words to him: he knew their meaning, he knew these acts would have hurt her, but she might as well have been describing a mathematical theorem. He stretched a hand across the table, but Margit ignored it. He said awkwardly, "This was... the Holocaust?"

She looked up at him, shaking her head, almost laughing at his naïvete. "Not even one of them. Not a war, not a pogrom. Just one psychopathic man. He locked us in his basement, for six months. He'd killed seven women." Tears began spilling down her cheeks. "He showed us the bodies. They were buried right where we slept. He showed us how we'd end up, when he was through with us."

Jamil was numb. He'd known all his adult life what had once been possible – what had once happened, to real people – but it had all been consigned to history long before his birth. In retrospect it seemed almost inconceivably stupid, but he'd always imagined that the changes had come in such a way that no one still living had experienced these horrors. There'd been no escaping the bare minimum, the logical necessity: his oldest living ancestors must have watched their parents fall peacefully into eternal sleep. But not this. Not a flesh-and-blood woman, sitting in front of him, who'd been forced to sleep in a killer's graveyard.

He put his hand over hers, and choked out the words. "This man... *killed* Grace? He killed your friend?"

Margit began sobbing, but she shook her head. "No, no. We got out!" She twisted her mouth into a smile. "Someone stabbed the stupid fucker in a bar-room brawl. We dug our way out while he was in hospital." She put her face down on the table and wept, but she held Jamil's hand against her cheek. He couldn't understand what she'd lived through, but that didn't mean he

couldn't console her. Hadn't he touched his mother's face the same way, when she was sad beyond his childish comprehension?

She composed herself, and continued. "We made a resolution, while we were in there. If we survived, there'd be no more empty promises. No more day dreams. What he'd done to those seven women – and what he'd done to us – would become impossible."

*And it had.* Whatever harm befell your body, you had the power to shut off your senses and decline to experience it. If the flesh was damaged, it could always be repaired or replaced. In the unlikely event that your jewel itself was destroyed, everyone had backups, scattered across universes. No human being could inflict physical pain on another. In theory, you could still be killed, but it would take the same kind of resources as destroying a galaxy. The only people who seriously contemplated either were the villains in very bad operas.

Jamil's eyes narrowed in wonder. She'd spoken those last words with such fierce pride that there was no question of her having failed.

"You are Ndoli? You invented the jewel?" As a child, he'd been told that the machine in his skull had been designed by a man who'd died long ago.

Margit stroked his hand, amused. "In those days, very few Hungarian women could be mistaken for Nigerian men. I've never changed my body that much, Jamil. I've always looked much as you see me."

Jamil was relieved; if she'd been Ndoli himself, he might have succumbed to sheer awe and started babbling idolatrous nonsense. "But you worked with Ndoli? You and Grace?"

She shook her head. "We made the resolution, and then we floundered. We were mathematicians, not neurologists. There were a thousand things going on at once: tissue engineering, brain imaging, molecular computers. We had no real idea where to put our efforts, which problems we should bring our strengths to bear upon. Ndoli's work didn't come out of the blue for us, but we played no part in it.

"For a while, almost everyone was nervous about switching from the brain to the jewel. In the early days, the jewel was a separate device that learned its task by mimicking the brain, and it had to be handed control of the body at one chosen moment. It took another 50 years before it could be engineered to replace the brain incrementally, neuron by neuron, in a seamless transition throughout adolescence."

So Grace had lived to see the jewel invented, but held back, and died before she could use it? Jamil kept himself from blurting out this conclusion; all his guesses had proved wrong so far.

Margit continued. "Some people weren't just nervous, though. You'd be amazed how vehemently Ndoli was denounced in certain quarters. And I don't just mean the fanatics who churned out paranoid tracts about 'the machines' taking over, with their evil inhuman agendas. Some people's antagonism had nothing to do with the specifics of the technology. They were opposed to immortality, in principle."

Jamil laughed. "Why?"

"Ten thousand years' worth of sophistry doesn't vanish overnight," Margit observed dryly. "Every human culture had expended vast amounts of intellectual effort on the problem of coming to terms with death. Most religions had constructed elaborate lies about it, making it out to be something other than it was – though a few were dishonest about life, instead. But even most secular philosophies were warped by the need to pretend that *death was for the best*."

"It was the naturalistic fallacy at its most extreme – and its most transparent, but that didn't stop anyone. Since any child could tell you that death was meaningless, contingent, unjust, and abhorrent beyond words, it was a hallmark of sophistication to believe otherwise. Writers had consoled themselves for centuries with smug puritanical fables about immortals who'd long for death – who'd *beg* for death. It would have been too much to expect all those who were suddenly faced with the reality of its banishment to confess that they'd been whistling in the dark. And would-be moral philosophers – mostly those who'd experienced no greater inconvenience in their lives than a late train or a surly waiter – began wailing about the destruction of the human spirit by this hideous blight. We needed death and suffering, to put steel into our souls! Not horrible, horrible *freedom and safety!*"

Jamil smiled. "So there were buffoons. But in the end, surely they swallowed their pride? If we're walking in a desert and I tell you that the lake you see ahead is a mirage, I might cling stubbornly to my own belief, to save myself from disappointment. But when we arrive, and I'm proven wrong, I *will* drink from the lake."

Margit nodded. "Most of the loudest of these people went quiet in the end. But there were subtler arguments, too. Like it or not, all our biology and all of our culture *had* evolved in the presence of death. And almost every righteous struggle in history, every worthwhile sacrifice, had been against suffering, against violence, against death. Now, that struggle would become impossible."

"Yes." Jamil was mystified. "But only because it had triumphed."

Margit said gently, "I know. There was no sense to it. And it was always my belief that anything worth fighting for – over centuries, over millennia – was worth attaining. It *can't* be noble to toil for a cause, and even to die for it, unless it's also noble to succeed. To claim otherwise isn't sophistication, it's just a kind of hypocrisy. If it's better to travel than arrive, you shouldn't start the voyage in the first place.

"I told Grace as much, and she agreed. We laughed together at what we called the *tragedians*: the people who denounced the coming age as the age without martyrs, the age without saints, the age without revolutionaries. There would never be another Gandhi, another Mandela, another Aung San Suu Kyi – and yes, that *was* a kind of loss, but would any great leader have sentenced humanity to eternal misery, for the sake of providing a suitable backdrop for eternal heroism? Well, some of them would have. But the down-trodden themselves had better things to do."

Margit fell silent. Jamil cleared her plate away, then



sat opposite her again. It was almost dawn.

"Of course, the jewel was not enough," Margit continued. "With care, Earth could support 40 billion people, but where would the rest go? The jewel made virtual reality the easiest escape route: for a fraction of the space, a fraction of the energy, it could survive without a body attached. Grace and I weren't horrified by that prospect, the way some people were. But it was not the best outcome, it was not what most people wanted, the way they wanted freedom from death.

"So we studied gravity, we studied the vacuum."

Jamil feared making a fool of himself again, but from the expression on her face he knew he wasn't wrong this time. *M. Osvát and G. Füst*. Co-authors of the seminal paper, but no more was known about them than those abbreviated names. "You gave us the New Territories?"

Margit nodded slightly. "Grace and I."

Jamil was overwhelmed with love for her. He went to her and knelt down to put his arms around her waist. Margit touched his shoulder. "Come on, get up. Don't treat me like a god, it just makes me feel old."

He stood, smiling abashedly. Anyone in pain deserved his help – but if he was not in her debt, the word had no meaning.

"And Grace?" he asked.

Margit looked away. "Grace completed her work, and then decided that she was a tragedian, after all. Rape was impossible. Torture was impossible. Poverty was vanishing. Death was receding into cosmology, into metaphysics. It was everything she'd hoped would come to pass. And for her, suddenly faced with that fulfilment, everything that remained seemed trivial.

"One night, she climbed into the furnace in the basement of her building. Her jewel survived the flames, but she'd erased it from within."

It was morning now. Jamil was beginning to feel disoriented; Margit should have vanished in daylight, an apparition unable to persist in the mundane world.

"I'd lost other people who were close to me," she said. "My parents. My brother. Friends. And so had everyone around me, then. I wasn't special: grief was still commonplace. But decade by decade, century by century, we shrank into insignificance, those of us who knew what it meant to lose someone for ever. We're less than one

in a million, now.

"For a long time, I clung to my own generation. There were enclaves, there were ghettos, where everyone understood the old days. I spent 200 years married to a man who wrote a play called *We Who Have Known the Dead* – which was every bit as pretentious and self-pitying as you'd guess from the title." She smiled at the memory. "It was a horrible, self-devouring world. If I'd stayed in it much longer, I would have followed Grace. I would have begged for death."

She looked up at Jamil. "It's people like you I want to be with: *people who don't understand*. Your lives aren't trivial, any more than the best parts of our own were:

all the tranquillity, all the beauty, all the happiness that made the sacrifices and the life-and-death struggles worthwhile.

"The tragedians were wrong. They had everything upside-down. Death never gave meaning to life: it was always the other way round. All of its gravitas, all of its significance, was stolen from the things it ended. But the value of life always lay entirely in itself – not in its loss, not in its fragility.

"Grace should have lived to see that. She should have lived long enough to understand that the world hadn't turned to ash."

Jamil sat in silence, turning the whole confession over in his mind, trying to absorb it well enough not to add to her distress with a misjudged question. Finally, he ventured, "Why do you hold

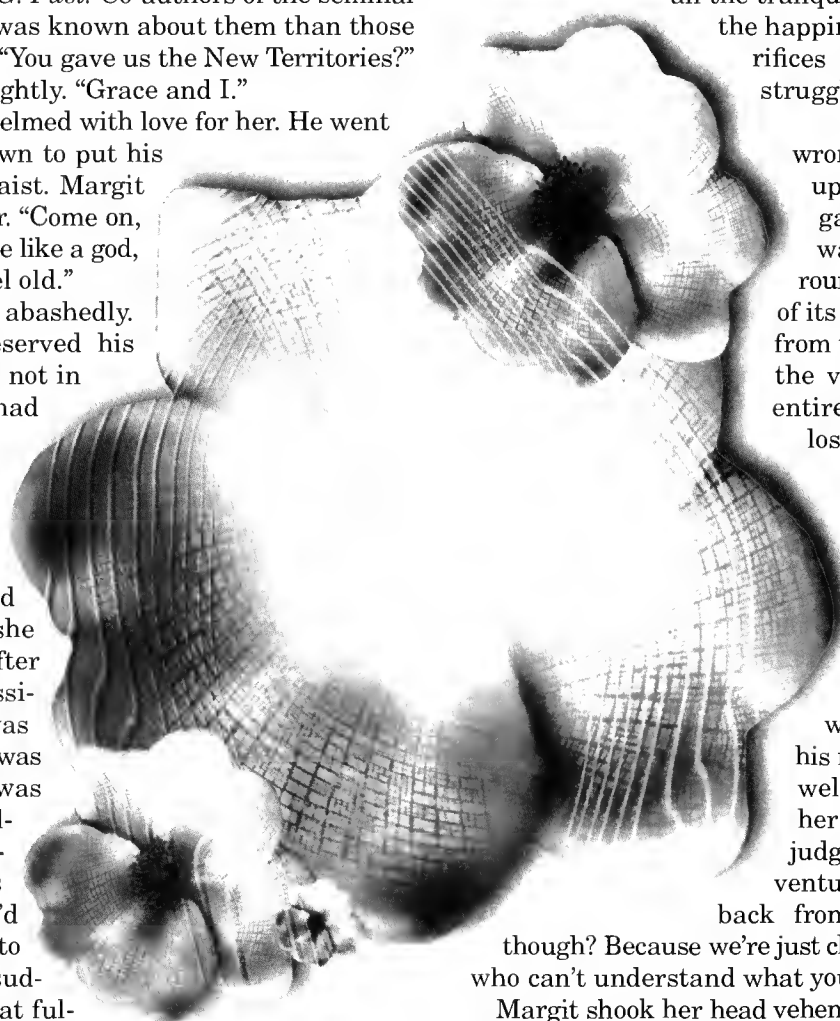
back from friendship with us,

though? Because we're just children to you? Children who can't understand what you've lost?"

Margit shook her head vehemently. "I don't want you to understand! People like me are the only blight on this world, the only poison." She smiled at Jamil's expression of anguish, and rushed to silence him before he could swear that she was nothing of the kind. "Not in everything we do and say, or everyone we touch: I'm not claiming that we're tainted, in some fatuous mythological sense. But when I left the ghettos, I promised myself that I wouldn't bring the past with me. Sometimes that's an easy vow to keep. Sometimes it's not."

"You've broken it tonight," Jamil said plainly. "And neither of us have been struck down by lightning."

"I know." She took his hand. "But I was wrong to tell you what I have, and I'll fight to regain the strength to stay silent. I stand at the border between two worlds, Jamil. I remember death, and I always will. But my job



now is to guard that border. To keep that knowledge from invading your world.”

“We’re not as fragile as you think,” he protested. “We all know something about loss.”

Margit nodded soberly. “Your friend Chusok has vanished into the crowd. That’s how things work now: how you keep yourselves from suffocating in a jungle of endlessly growing connections, or fragmenting into isolated troupes of repertory players, endlessly churning out the same lines.

“You have your little deaths – and I don’t call them that to deride you. But I’ve seen both. And I promise you, they’re not the same.”

In the weeks that followed, Jamil resumed in full the life he’d made for himself in Noether. Five days in seven were for the difficult beauty of mathematics. The rest were for his friends.

He kept playing matches, and Margit’s team kept winning. In the sixth game, though, Jamil’s team finally scored against her. Their defeat was only three to one.

Each night, Jamil struggled with the question. What exactly did he owe her? Eternal loyalty, eternal silence, eternal obedience? She hadn’t sworn him to secrecy; she’d extracted no promises at all. But he knew she was trusting him to comply with her wishes, so what right did he have to do otherwise?

Eight weeks after the night he’d spent with Margit, Jamil found himself alone with Penina in a room in Joracy’s house. They’d been talking about the old days. Talking about Chusok.

Jamil said, “Margit lost someone, very close to her.”

Penina nodded matter-of-factly, but curled into a comfortable position on the couch and prepared to take in every word.

“Not in the way we’ve lost Chusok. Not in the way you think at all.”

Jamil approached the others, one by one. His confidence ebbed and flowed. He’d glimpsed the old world, but he couldn’t pretend to have fathomed its inhabitants. What if Margit saw this as worse than betrayal – as a further torture, a further rape?

But he couldn’t stand by and leave her to the torture she’d inflicted on herself.

Ezequiel was the hardest to face. Jamil spent a sick and sleepless night beforehand, wondering if this would make him a monster, a corrupter of children, the epitome of everything Margit believed she was fighting.

Ezequiel wept freely, but he was not a child. He was older than Jamil, and he had more steel in his soul than any of them.

He said, “I guessed it might be that. I guessed she might have seen the bad times. But I never found a way to ask her.”

The three lobes of probability converged, melted into a plateau, rose into a pillar of light.

The umpire said, “Fifty-five point nine.” It was Margit’s most impressive goal yet.

Ezequiel whooped joyfully and ran towards her. When he scooped her up in his arms and threw her across his

shoulders, she laughed and indulged him. When Jamil stood beside him and they made a joint throne for her with their arms, she frowned down at him and said, “You shouldn’t be doing this. You’re on the losing side.”

The rest of the players converged on them, cheering, and they started down towards the river. Margit looked around nervously. “What is this? We haven’t finished playing.”

Penina said, “The game’s over early, just this once. Think of this as an invitation. We want you to swim with us. We want you to talk to us. We want to hear everything about your life.”

Margit’s composure began to crack. She squeezed Jamil’s shoulder. He whispered, “Say the word, and we’ll put you down.”

Margit didn’t whisper back; she shouted miserably, “What do you want from me, you parasites? I’ve won your fucking game for you! What more do you want?”

Jamil was mortified. He stopped and prepared to lower her, prepared to retreat, but Ezequiel caught his arm.

Ezequiel said, “We want to be your border guards. We want to stand beside you.”

Christa added, “We can’t face what you’ve faced, but we want to understand. As much as we can.”

Joracy spoke, then Yann, Narcyza, Maria, Halide. Margit looked down on them, weeping, confused.

Jamil burnt with shame. He’d hijacked her, humiliated her. He’d made everything worse. She’d flee Noether, flee into a new exile, more alone than ever.

When everyone had spoken, silence descended. Margit trembled on her throne.

Jamil faced the ground. He couldn’t undo what he’d done. He said quietly, “Now you know our wishes. Will you tell us yours?”

“Put me down.”

Jamil and Ezequiel complied.

Margit looked around at her teammates and opponents, her children, her creation, her would-be friends.

She said, “I want to go to the river with you. I’m seven thousand years old, and I want to learn to swim.”

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**Author’s Note:** Readers with internet connections and web browsers that support Java (such as Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer, versions 3 or later) can find an interactive illustration of quantum soccer at <http://www.netSPACE.net.au/~gregegan/BORDER/Soccer/Soccer.html>

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**Greg Egan’s** latest novel is *Teranesia* (well reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 147). His last stories here were “Reasons to Be Cheerful” (issue 118) and “Orphanogenesis” (issue 123). He continues to live in Perth, Western Australia.



# At the Corner of Darwin and Eternity

*Robert Reed*

**I**n the neighbourhood's eyes he was Falling Apart Edgar, a senescence-freak and a crazy. Freaks believed it was wrong for people to live long and happy lives; at least that's the way Tristene's parents explained it to her. And Edgar was crazy, said everyone else. He was crazy because he actually put his beliefs to practice, letting himself fall apart, his body and angry brain growing old in ways people never got old any more.

Yet he was a smart man, too. Nobody dared say otherwise.

He used to be a professor for a faraway university, just like Tristene's Great Gammie was. But because he was falling apart, and crazy, they made him retire. One neighbour kid, more loud than smart, claimed that Edgar could have won the Nobel Prize, except the judges wouldn't vote for a senescence-freak. Particularly a freak who said that greats and great-greats should be required to stop taking treatments, and people who didn't co-operate were no different from the worst criminals.

Even Tristene's parents despised their neighbour, telling her to avoid the man and his property. Which for most of her life, Tristene did.

But when she was ten, a funny-weird sound came through the window of her bed chamber. It was spring-time, and the government had just pulled a rainstorm across the sky, leaving the world wet and two-thirds clean. And Tristene slipped out the window, following the sound to the high, high fence that stood between her

yard and Falling Apart Edgar's. The fence was supposed to be solid and soundproofed, but winds had popped lose one of the fibreboards. And that's where the singing came from. Singing, she thought. Like a sparrow's, except it wasn't. Kreekee-chirp. Kreekee-chirp. Something was singing in the dark expanse of her neighbour's yard. And before she knew what her legs were doing, Tristene slipped through the gap, and after some deep breaths for bravery, she went exploring.

There were trees enough for ten parks, and the air smelled of drenched soil, and mixed into the kreekee-chirps were the bright, dancing sounds of running water. But what truly astonished Tristene was the size of the place. It was a rectangle of leftover ground, high-rails and normal neighbourhoods surrounding two whole hectares. On a dark spring night, it seemed vast. And wonderfully mysterious. Footpaths led her to a kidney-shaped pond. That's where the kreekee-chirps came from. And she crept close, then paused, listening to the song until she was just about bored.

Tristene had never seen a frog outside someone's cage.

And she never saw that frog, either. Just as she was getting ready to creep closer, the song stopped in mid-kreekee. Why?

She had a feeling, then turned and saw a man standing in her tracks.

For just that instant – for the only time ever – Tristene was terrified of Edgar.

"Don't tell me," the old man began. "That face of yours. Your complexion. And that kinky cute hair...! You've come from New Guinea. Am I right?"

Long ago, yes. But she was adopted when she was a baby.

"You live somewhere close, don't you?" He nodded, then admitted, "I've seen you, but I don't think that I've ever heard your name."

"Tristene," she replied. Then, "Carsons."

"Another exotic finds our shores," he said mysteriously. Then he stepped forwards, the reflected lights of the city making his white hair shine, his very craggy, deeply lined face breaking into an easy smile. "I'm your neighbour. Crazy Edgar Witherstone, and thrilled to meet you."

He extended a hand, waiting patiently for her to take it. The hand was strangely cool, and like everything else about him, astonishingly old.

"I don't have many visitors," Edgar confessed. "May I ask how you got here?"

She told about the gap in the fence, and the frog.

He stepped to the edge of the pond, remarking, "Not many people would recognize a frog's call."

"I've heard them," she told him. "In science class, and the wilderness channels –"

"VR doesn't count," he warned.

She didn't see why not, but she said nothing.

Then he asked, "What else is strange here? Do you see anything?"

"You," she said.

Which surprised him. She knew by the way he laughed.

"I'm peculiar, am I?"

Tristene squirmed, angry at her own mouth. "The way you look. It's off the curve, sort of."

"Because I refuse to take the treatments, you mean." She nodded.

"I'm barely 78," Edgar replied. Then with a little boy's grin, he added, "Isn't that remarkable?"

"My grandparents are that old. Nearly."

"And your great-grandparents?"

"Oh, they're older." She said it, then rolled her eyes. Of course they were older. What a stupid pack of words! "My Great Gammie just turned a century old."

"Do you have any great-greats?"

"Eight or nine. I can't remember."

"How do they look? Compared to me, I mean."

A hundred times better. But instead of answering, Tristene asked her own question. "Why won't you take the treatments? Everyone else does."

"Like you?"

"I will," she promised.

"I don't because that's the right thing to do." Edgar was smiling, something about that old face wise and sure. "So long as I am here, nothing new and different can emerge. Which is why I have a holy obligation, like all of us have, to expire and get the hell out of the way."

She didn't understand and nearly said so.

But then he winked unexpectedly, telling her, "I hear a mother calling."

"Tristene!" the distant voice cried out.

Then the cool hand pushed at her. "Run home," the

old man suggested. "And if I were you, I'd keep our little meeting here secret."

The fence was patched in the night, but in an unexpected way. The plank was fastened down with springy hinges, and Tristene could pull it open. Which is what she did. And she was free to climb through, which is what she kept herself from doing. It was school time. She had to sit in class until the classroom dissolved back into being just a little white VR closet, and that's when she could finally slip outside again. Her parents were still working inside their closets; they were too busy to bother with lies, she reasoned. And there was no force in the universe that could keep Tristene from taking the three big steps across her bluegrass lawn, Edgar's camouflaged gateway practically flinging itself open for her.

In daylight, his yard looked smaller. Shaggy young pines pretended to be a forest, and the little pond wasn't much deeper than a puddle. But this time as she crept up to the water's edge, she saw a flash of colour, greener than green, and a pair of long, long legs that were being dragged underwater by a slimy bug-fed body.

Fish darted in tight little schools. They looked pretty when the sun hit them just so, but mostly they looked brown and boring.

Falling out of the pond was a stream two-thirds hidden by ferns. The water sounded pretty, but it looked otherwise, flowing over concrete and old bricks, spilling into a bigger pond where more fish slipped back and forth. They were like the fish in the first pond, except silvery, and prettier. A single frog squatted on a slab of old pavement, enjoying the afternoon. It wore thick skin and strange shades of green that formed hexagons on its long back and head. For a frog, it wasn't too ugly. Tristene watched it until she realized that it wouldn't move for her, and that's when she threw the chunk of mortar, causing two big splashes and a soggy little kreekee-chirp.

Pressing on, Tristene climbed a little hill.

Standing in the sunshine was the oddest old building. It didn't look like any house she had ever seen, huge and ugly with a flat roof and walls of concrete block and big doorways meant to let automobiles in and out. But the walls were painted a handsome green, and the front door looked exactly like any house's front door, the single eye staring out at her, its voice sounding a lot like its owner.

"Is Edgar home?" she inquired, trying not to appear nervous.

The door said, "He's always home," with a laugh. Then it opened, revealing her new friend, dressed but dishevelled. "Come on in, Tristene."

She wouldn't. Her parents would kill themselves if she did that, she was sure.

"Or I'll come out instead," he said. "Give me a minute."

She waited, trying to remember every question that she'd wanted to ask.

When Edgar re-emerged, he hadn't combed his hair or tucked in his shirt. But he was carrying a reader now. Tristene had never seen such an old reader, or anyone who moved as stiffly as him. "I'm glad you accepted the invitation," he told her.

"I wanted to see your frogs," she confessed.

"Oh, I've got a few. A few."

"But frogs don't live outdoors any more." She had watched a nature digital during school today, preparing for this moment. "There's not enough clean water any more, and sunshine kills them."

"Yes," he admitted, "they're sensitive creatures."

Sensitive didn't seem like the right word.

"You must like ponds," she said. "How many do you have?"

"Nineteen," he replied, with pride.

She laughed doubtfully. "I've seen two of them."

"They're artfully hidden. And some aren't very large, really. Just enough to be wet, and that's all."

His reader displayed a map. At first glance, Tristene assumed it was a map of his yard, but instead it showed a distant island.

"We're standing beside one of my ponds," Edgar remarked.

There was nothing to see but low spring weeds and the occasional slab of uprooted pavement.

"Do you know what this place was?" He asked the question, then answered it in the next breath. "This was a dirty old service station, complete with underground tanks full of gasoline and other outrages."

Tristene looked at his house again, as if for the first time.

"When the cars quit coming," he explained, "the industry went extinct. Nobody had the money to clean up this ground. The old tanks are still here. I bought the land cheap and cleaned out the goo myself."

He bent as if he might break, giving one of the slabs a big shove. The concrete was on rails and steel wheels, and it rolled away, exposing a hole no wider than Tristene was tall, but deep. Practically bottomless. Tilting her head just so, she could see fish swimming at the water's surface. There weren't many of them, and they were tiny. But they were yogurty-white and shaped like the fish in the other ponds, and she mentioned that.

"You have a sharp eye," Edgar told her.

She felt herself swell up and smile.

"Speaking of which... do you notice anything about their eyes...?"

They had none. The fish were blind.

"Have you ever heard about cave fish?"

She shook her head. "Is that what these are?"

"Oh, no. Most of those hypogeous ecosystems are extinct. Acid rain and mining killed them. And where the water wasn't poisoned, it was diverted into people's pipes." His rough old voice sounded sad, but his face was something else. "What you see here – what no one else has ever seen – is an entirely new species. It's based on a durable and common little minnow. *Pimephales promelas*."

"Based on?"

"And so are the other fish on my land. Thirty-five new species of *Pimephales*, including three that are completely blind. One species in each one of the old tanks."

She didn't know quite what to make of those words. But instead of saying so, Tristene told him, "I know what that map shows."

"You do?"

"That's where I was born," she said.

"No," he replied, "it isn't."

But she was looking at the emerald face of New Guinea. Had Edgar already forgotten where she came from? Old people used to be that way, she knew. They were forgetful and confused, and you had to be patient with them.

"This is a computer model," Edgar explained, nothing confused about him. "It shows the island before civilization arrived. Before the timber harvests and strip mines and those terrible civil wars."

She squinted at the sun-washed screen.

He touched a worn button, saying, "Here. I wanted to show you. These are relatives of yours. Dear, not-so-distant cousins that nobody thought to adopt, which is why they aren't with us any longer."

Fancy names scrolled past. Pictures beside each name showed what they were. Trees. Flowers. Bugs and birds. "These aren't cousins," she argued, handing back the reader. "This thing looks like a cockroach!"

Edgar laughed, saying, "Beetles. People. They're all the same bricks stuck into different walls."

He was a strange old man, she was thinking.

As if he could read her mind, he said, "Tell me, Tristene. Why do people feel compelled to call me insane?"

Because he was a senescence-freak, though she didn't say it that way.

"No, I'll tell you the real reason," he said. "When someone holds a radical opinion, insanity is a comforting explanation."

Tristene looked at the reader again. It hadn't stopped scrolling through the dead cousins, and it was moving too fast to be read.

Edgar gave her a mischievous wink.

"I've never gotten around to naming this species," he told her.

She glanced at the blind fish and their cool black water.

"*Pimephales tristene*," he said. "What do you think about that name?"

"Really?" she sputtered.

"Really," he replied, repeating the mischievous wink. Then he asked her, "How many friends of yours have a new species named after them?"

Ten-year-old girls have a wealth of friends, and they have school, and if they're lucky, they have someone like Great Gammie who they can visit through VR any time. That's why Tristene went so long before visiting Edgar again. He was just one of Tristene's friends, in the neighbourhood and around the world; and besides, she wasn't suppose to speak to him. Which was why it was suddenly three weeks later, and summer had arrived, and she was playing with some of the local kids outdoors.

Long ago, paved streets had curled their way through their neighbourhood, flanked by deep yards and distant houses. But the land got to be worth too much, and people tore down everything to build again, fitting as many trim modern homes as possible into the expensive ground. Every shred of pavement was peeled up and recycled, which was a good thing. When people needed to travel, they used the VR closets. It they had to physically go



someplace else, high-rails and subways waited nearby, ready to carry them anywhere in the world. And if a person had possessions to bring home or throw away, like a month's groceries or worn-out furniture, he simply hired a service, and one of the commercial scorpions would come along on a dozen delicate feet.

While Tristene was outdoors, a big brown UPS scorpion left a box at Edgar's gate.

It was a huge box with little holes in its side and a fan blowing air. Tristene was curious, but not curious enough to suggest looking too closely. Someone might ask, "Why would we want to? What do you care?"

Because there was something interesting in that box, she was thinking. In secret.

The children were playing rage ball, everyone running and screeching as they tried to outwit a self-bouncing, chip-piloted bladder. But the game came to an abrupt halt when Edgar emerged, a home scorpion at his heels. He was wearing his usual sloppy clothes and a big smile that embarrassed Tristene even before it was pointed in her direction. Then as the scorpion grabbed the box with its tail, Edgar noticed the two dozen children gawking, and he shouted, "There's too many of you! The world's going to damn well explode!"

Mercifully, he never spoke to Tristene.

When he finally vanished and the gate was safely bolted, one of the older boys shouted, "I hope that senescence-freak hurries up and dies!"

Tristene said nothing, but in a particular way.

The boy noticed her silence. "What do you think about F. A. Edgar?"

"Nothing," she said, aiming for an imagined neutrality.

"Nothing?" the boy mocked.

What was she supposed to tell him?

But then he was saying, "I forgot. You're a little cannibal. You like the idea of killing everyone older than 80."

"I don't," Tristene cried out. "I do not!"

"Cannibal, cannibal!" he chanted.

With both fists, she hit him as hard as she could, not even doing the tiniest harm.

"Cannibal, cannibal!"

Then Tristene ran home in tears, hating the boy for what he said, and Edgar for showing his face, but mostly hating herself for being so tiny, and so miserably weak.

"Wait here," said Edgar. "I'll bring one right out."

One what? But Tristene didn't ask, sitting on the pond's roof for all of 20 seconds, then giving it a good hard shove. When Edgar returned, she was counting the *Pimephales tristene*. "I don't think there's as many," she warned.

"Populations rise and fall," he countered. "Here. Have a look!"

In a simple wire cage was a simple bird. Tristene peered at the nervous eyes, and with genuine disappointment said, "That's a pigeon."

"A rock dove. Yes."

"That's what came yesterday? Pigeons?"

"Twenty-one of them, yes. Disease-free and genetically inventoried." He set the bird in the shade, saying, "Doves are a durable, exotic species. Do you know what I mean by 'exotic'?"

She thought so, but said, "No," just to be safe.

"A non-native species. In this case, from Europe." He poked at the cage as if he disapproved of its occupant. "Wonderfully adapted to urban environments. Not just here, but in temperate biomes worldwide."

Tristene nodded, trying to decipher his words.

"The dodo," said Edgar.

"Excuse me?"

"Have you heard of the bird?"

The image of an ungainly, big-billed *something* flashed into her mind.

"Flightless," he said. "It lived on an island in the Indian Ocean. And for centuries, it's been utterly extinct." Edgar nodded in no particular direction. "Dodos evolved from a species of dove. A flock must have been carried to the island by a storm, and like any population separated from its species, it took sail on its own genetic sea. In this case, the doves' descendants grew larger, and fatter, and decidedly less motivated to fly."

She was trying to listen, but she kept thinking about her blind fish.

"Wouldn't it be lovely?" Edgar asked. "We journey to Mauritius with a box of pigeons, and using simple techniques, we reinvent the dodo. In a sense."

"In a sense?"

He didn't seem to hear the question. "First of all, we'd have to tweak the birds' genetics appropriately. Which is a surprisingly easy step, as it happens."

Maybe for Edgar.

"Do you know what the difference is between you and a chimpanzee?"

A cold spike sliced down her backbone.

But Edgar didn't mean it to insult. "There's little difference between human beings and the apes," he promised. "In the greater measure, gene for gene, we're pretty much the same species."

She must have looked doubtful.

"Each of us is built from 100,000 genes," he explained. "A hundred thousand blocks. But think how many wonders you could build with so many blocks, just by stacking them in dissimilar ways."

The pigeon made a soft pigeon sound.

"The other obstacle is the environment," said Edgar, "but that's easily modeled. Cities are simple, predictable places. Wherever you go in the world, you see the same creatures. The same building materials. The same man-made climate."

She looked at the pigeon. "Will you make it into a dodo?"

"No," he said. "Not directly. That's a million times too difficult."

She would hope so.

"I'll culture the pigeons' cells, and with machinery of my own design, I'll duplicate ten thousand generations in about 50 days. If I hurry."

Tristene stared off into the trees, imagining big-billed birds waddling in the shade.

"Our poor world is crowded and impoverished. A species vanishes every 28 seconds, and the carnage could be worse, but so many scarce, overspecialized species have already died off." He was speaking to Tristene but watching the pigeon. "I used to waste my ener-

gies fighting for those doomed species. But a few years ago, after all that relentless failure, the obvious occurred to me: I could create a simple system for building new species. We could recapture our lost diversity. Every city in the world would have its own endemic trees and birds, and every puddle would have its special fish and frogs. Wouldn't that be a lovely future? Wouldn't you like to live there, Tristene?"

"Yes," she said.

"That's going to be my legacy: The rebirth of diversity!"

Except the pigeon already looked two-thirds lovely in its own right. Tristene was thinking it, but she didn't say it, sensing that Edgar wouldn't agree.

The first squabs were hatched in late August.

Tristene didn't understand Edgar's methods or most of his words, but she felt a genuine excitement when she saw that first big-billed newborn lying in its bed of fake down.

"It looks so helpless," she observed. "And ugly, too."

There were 50 squabs, each in its own heated box, each box equipped with an automated dodo-like head that deployed to feed and preen as needed.

The peculiar nursery filled one of the gas station's bays. The adjacent bay served as Edgar's laboratory, sturdy old tables holding odd machines that were doing nothing, wrapped up in plastic blankets and looking rather bored.

It was the first time Tristene had been inside his home. Glancing out the window, she remarked, "My fish aren't doing all that well."

"Which fish?" asked Edgar.

The blind fish, of course. She had already checked on them, throwing bugs into their dark little home while she took a quick, thorough census.

"We should help them," she said.

"I doubt if we could," he replied. "Their population is terribly small, and the danger of being scarce is that a species gets itself into a genetic cul-de-sac."

"But these machines..." she began.

"You want to improve your fish?"

"No. I just want to make more of them."

Edgar was plainly uninterested. Shaking his head, he said, "I built them once already. That's enough."

Tristene gazed only at the only location in the entire universe where *Pimephales tristene* existed, and she struggled to sort out her thoughts.

"Besides," Edgar continued, "we've still got two other species of blind fish here." He showed her a distracted smile. "Adopt one of them in its place. That, Tristene, is my very considerable advice."

Great Gammie was exactly what Tristene wanted to be in another hundred years: beautiful and intelligent, and perceptive, with a husband and career whom she adored, and a beautiful ebony belly that was swelling, the little girl inside her – her eighth child – nearly ready now to be born.

"Hello, darling," said Tristene's favourite great. "Is something wrong? You look concerned."

"I need a favour," the girl blurted out.

A brilliant smile blossomed easily. "What sort of

favour?"

"My birthday," Tristene began, wishing she could hug Gammie. Not the VR great, but the real one. "Is there any way, please... could I have my present early this year...?"

The image regarded her with warmth tempered with the slightest suspicion. Then after a moment, Gammie said, "And you have a present in mind...?"

She described it, in brief.

"That's a lovely idea, Tristene. But why can't it wait?"

"It just can't," she said.

"I suppose not." The ageless woman chuckled for a moment. "Ten years old and going on eleven can seem to take so very long. I remember."

Tristene nodded agreeably.

"How soon is soon, darling?"

She had no idea. Every time she visited Edgar's, there were two or three fewer blindfish. At this rate, they would be extinct in a few weeks, which was why she took a few deep breaths, then found the courage to say, "Tomorrow."

More than anything, Gammie seemed intrigued.

With a twinkle and a wink, she said, "But you'll have to show me what you do with it. Okay? The next time we talk. Okay? Okay!"

The brown scorpion delivered her package in the morning, as promised. Then it walked next door to Edgar's gate, leaving a tiny nondescript box inside his security slot. Then the scorpion walked slowly toward the high-rail, which was odd. The machine acted as if it wasn't sure where it was going, and Tristene watched it for all of ten seconds before she hurried inside, her early birthday gift filling her joyous outstretched arms.

The rest of the day was spent assembling the tank in her bedchamber, then filling it with water and telling the tank's AI what kind of fish to expect. *Pimephales tristene* didn't exist in its mind. So she settled on *Pimephales promelas*, which it knew; the pH and temperature were adjusted accordingly. Then Tristene went to bed and slept badly until two in the morning, then shot out of bed. Armed with a net, a snakelight and a large water bottle, she slipped through the secret gate and past the first ponds, reaching Edgar's house in no time at all.

His lights were burning.

Old-fashioned old people never slept much; Great Gammie had mentioned that to her once, and Tristene assumed that's why Edgar was awake.

She opened the tank's lid with a quiet grunt. Then with the snakelight wrapped around her neck, she reached down, netting the blindfish as they rose, perhaps expecting to feed on whatever was falling into their tiny home.

Eventually two dozen *P. tristenes* were swimming in the water bottle; no more were rising from the inky water.

She closed the lid then, out of curiosity, sneaked closer to Edgar's house. He was sitting in the bay surrounded by his fancy machines, each one of them unwrapped and working. But wasn't he done with the squabs? Which meant that some strange new project was beginning.

Would she and Edgar still be friends tomorrow? Tristene didn't know, and at that moment, hurrying home again, she didn't particularly care.

Following the tank's instructions, she introduced her fish into their new home. Since there was so little room to spare in her room, she had set the enormous plastic tank in front of her window. The fish swam peacefully, exploring their universe by touch, and when she offered flaked food, they tasted it in the water, then gorged as if they hadn't eaten in days.

"I'll take care of you," she promised her helpless friends. Several times.

Around five in the morning, she drifted off to sleep, dreaming about water and blind fish and herself as a thousand-year-old woman, living beside another sun. Then she was awakened by a squadron of helicopters passing overhead, and she found that the sun had risen, a fresh light pouring through the aquarium before it touched her, and in that water her fish drifted, every last one of them stiff and dead, killed by a radiance they couldn't even see.

Tristene was staring numbly at her fish when the helicopters got louder and the secret gate swung open, and clambering through was a white-haired apparition made nimble with fear.

Edgar pressed his desperate face against the window glass, mouthing the words, "Help me!" and then, "Please!"

The fence behind him exploded, plastic planks scattering across the yard.

A line of police officers emerged from Edgar's forest. They walked slowly in their lumpy biohazard suits, but there were too many of them spread in a line, and Edgar couldn't outrun everyone. He was grabbed and handcuffed and pulled to the ground, the ranking officer shouting at him, telling him, "For the purchase and utilization of illegal genetic material, Dr Witherstone, you're under arrest."

"I want my attorney," Edgar growled.

"You have that right, but it won't help. We have you, you fuck. You miserable fuck!"

By then, Tristene was streaking out the back door.

"Leave him alone!" she screamed.

The police were startled to find a girl in their midst. They looked at each other with *what-now* expressions.

"I'm a political prisoner," Edgar was pleading, wild eyes pointed at the sky. "You have no jurisdiction over my mind...!"

Tristene meant to reach her friend. But Edgar seemed oblivious to her. Suddenly her legs quit moving. The girl found herself balancing on a random plank, not certain what to do, or believe.

"You can't stop this from happening!" the old man yelled. "Others believe in what I'm doing! And it's simple to do...! In another 20 years, believe me... even a child will be able to accomplish this...!"

A heavily gloved hand took Tristene by the shoulder.

Through the plastic mask, she saw a man smiling with a certain grimness. Treatments made it impossible to know his age, but he seemed to have old eyes and a hard-won wisdom. "Describe it to your friend here," he told Edgar. But he stared at Tristene, pretending a smile. "I'm sure she'd like to know all about these grand

plans of yours."

Tristene remembered yesterday's package, and she thought of Edgar working in the middle of the night. A cold terror began to grow in her belly, spreading into her aching chest. But she made herself defend him, saying, "He works with pigeons. And stupid frogs. What's the matter with that?"

Someone said, "Nothing."

Edgar did.

Then he admitted, "But these idiots are right, Tristene. I was just practising on those other species. Getting ready for *Homo sapiens*."

The girl didn't say a word or make the tiniest sound.

"Imagine," said Falling Apart Edgar. "A common virus slips inside all of us, then splits our chromosomes. In thousands of different ways, it remakes us. Just like I remade those little fish of yours. Within the space of a few weeks or months, our species is divided into a multitude of new, different species. Reproductively isolated. And unique."

She muttered, "Why?"

He was smiling, but at the same time, tears ran down his worn-out face. "Isn't it obvious, Tristene? People and fish are exactly the same. Diversity is always, always a wonderful thing!"

In the woods next door, napalm was being set free, obliterating everything that might pose a biological hazard. The air suddenly began to smell of fire, plus the piercing stink of incinerated flesh.

Again, the ancient face looked into Tristene's face. "Don't you understand? I did this for you, and for the whole world...!"

But she couldn't think about big things like the world, or herself.

Instead, she sniffed back tears, telling Edgar, "My fish are dead."

He blinked and started to ask, "What fish?"

Then he seemed to understand, laughing in a thin weird way as he told her, "Don't worry." With the air stinking of fire and carnage, he told her, "It's easy to make new ones. Better ones, even."

And something in those words made Tristene desperately sick.

If she lived ten thousand years, she might never, ever feel this sick and sad and scared again...

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**Robert Reed's** one previous story for *Interzone* was "The New System" (issue 138) but he is a frequent contributor to the leading American sf magazines and is known for novels such as *An Exaltation of Larks* (1995) and *Beneath the Gated Sky* (1997). He lives in Lincoln, Nebraska.



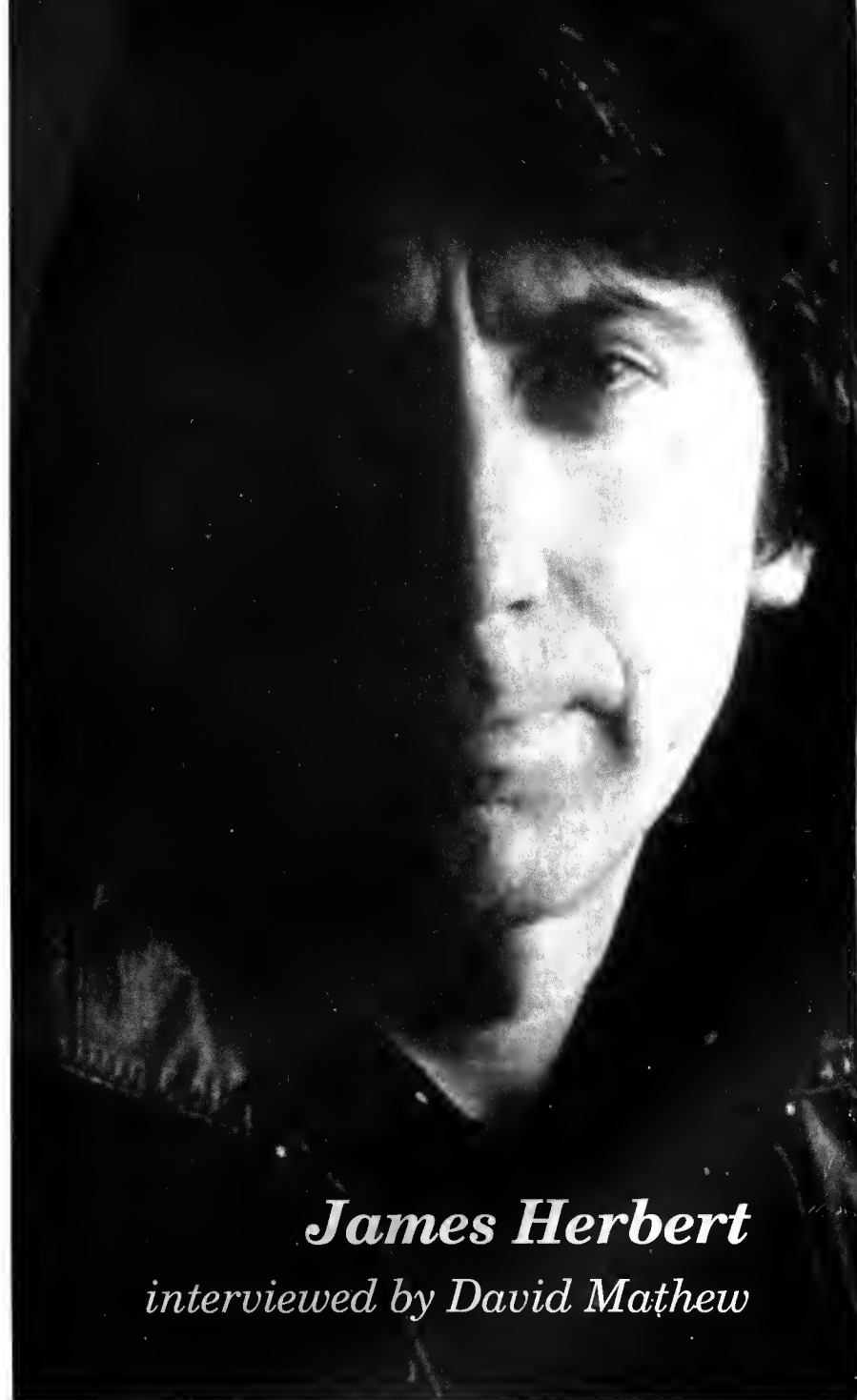
"It's all based on fact but no one's gonna believe it," says James Herbert, referring to the story that forms the background of his most recent novel, *Others*.

"It happened 30 years ago but I've been told it again since then. That's why it's been on my mind all this time, and I knew I had to do the book. This lady, now very elderly, she lived in the East End of London, and she had a day job, but because she needed the money she took a night job. She worked in a children's hospital in East London. She worked in the kitchens. One night – it was around midnight, and the first shift of nurses had just been fed and she was waiting for the next shift to come on – she went walkabout. She found herself on the top floor, where there was no one else around. But she saw these ward doors that said Keep Out – Strictly Private. And this lady's nature is very curious. She went inside and saw all these cots and little beds, and in them were babies with no arms, limbless... infants with heads so big they couldn't lift them off the pillow. All of them were terribly deformed. They were babies that were taken away from their mothers at birth – either because the mothers rejected them because they were so hideous, or the doctors didn't want to show them to their mothers because they were so grotesque. They were going to die anyway so they were just taken away... but they live on. And as this lady found out, there were infants and not just babies. So she started going back, night after night, bringing them treats; and in the end they'd be going, 'Mama, Mama...' And that story has always stayed with me.

"And then I found evidence that said, just because you're grotesquely malformed, it doesn't mean you don't live. We know that even one hundred years ago, these people were kept alive and were studied by medics. And I'm fairly certain now it still happens: they are so terrible to look at that they're kept out of the public gaze. Particularly with genetics now, I'm sure the research being done on these poor people is going on. But I can't prove anything. So that's the basic premise behind this story. There are these *others*... a lesser writer would have called the book 'Freaks' but that's not the way I treat it. The characters I describe are all based on case studies; I had the medical histories. That's the *first* set of Others you see. The second lot, that come as a shock, that's when I let my imagination go wild."

*Others* is Herbert's 19th novel. As he readily acknowledges, and as one might imagine, given the subject matter, there will probably be some flak aimed in his direction because of what he has written. But then again,

# Other Forms of Self-Defence



**James Herbert**

*interviewed by David Mathew*

for Herbert, this is nothing new. "My only answer can be: read the book. See what the book is really saying. But the press – they're lazy. They're gonna go, 'James Herbert? We know what he's about. He did *The Rats*.' And put their own opinion in."

He has always had a mixed reaction when being reviewed, although he claims: "For every three bad critiques I've had, I've seven or eight good ones. I'm hurt by them, of course, but in my heart I know I'm a good writer. I know what my intention is, so whatever anyone says, I know I'm writing as well as I can. If it's not good enough for those people, it's a shame, but I do think they come with a biased attitude." He believes that he is the subject of much misunderstanding, and that he is still being judged on the violent first novel, *The Rats*.

"It happens all the time," he says. "A guy came down last week from *The Telegraph*. I said, 'Have you read any of my books?' He said, 'Yes, I've read *The Rats* and *Others*.' In fact, he hadn't read *Others*; he'd read some of it, because he accused me of some very 1970s-styled writing. I used the word 'gig' – but I've got many musician friends and we all use that term quite often. 'Cop shop' is still in use; but then he said two phrases that are not even in the book: 'female of the species' and 'a legend in his own lunchtime.' I don't remember them being in the book. They're still out to get me..."

Why?

"One: I write horror, which is not respected. It's regarded as adolescent, whereas I happen to think it can tackle problems that are very profound. Two: I'm from the East End of London, I'm not from Oxford or Cambridge University, and that's not very good in the literary world. I still talk as though I'm from the East End. And three – the worst sin of all – I make too much money." (Few interviews with James Herbert are without a mention or two of his wealth. In this case, it is because *he* brings the subject up.) "There was a critique about *The Magic Cottage*, years ago, and this woman ended up by saying, 'But I'm sure Herbert will laugh his way to the bank.' And that's all the critique was about. Money. I *don't* laugh my way to the bank. I enjoy making good money but I'm afraid that's not what it's all about, although I still go for the big deal. They're paying me £2,000,000 for two books. I go for the big deal because I know they will work harder to sell the book. Plus, you reach a stage where that's what you're worth. And if that's what I'm worth, that's what I'll get. I don't need to work, but I love working. I've got ideas now to carry me through the next ten years. Nobody can see me giving up."

When Herbert says, "They're still out to get me," he is not referring only to the press. "Amongst the horror fraternity there's also a lot of envy. Certain writers don't *want* to like my work because it hurts their ego, so they also come to the books with an attitude. And again, maybe they've just read the early books anyway. Because I don't go to conferences and mix with many horror writers, I'm not there to defend myself, so it's bound to happen." Perhaps, in that case, it would be worth attending one or two? "Can't be bothered. When I was an Art Director (in the 1970s) we had what was called a Creative Circle. Didn't join. To me, I do a job and I don't want to talk about it afterwards. There's no attraction to me to meet lots of people and pat each other on the back. I've always been a loner. I mean, I've got some good mates and I'm very gregarious at times, but with work I'm very much a loner."

Something that neither journalists nor horror writers can fault, however, is Herbert's intensity of research. In *Others*, "a distraught mother had a baby 18 years before, and she wants a detective to locate the now-grown-up child." In order to write authentically about the daily life of a private investigator, Herbert enrolled himself on a course. "I did the exam; got 98%. You'd have to be a moron to fail. Then I took the Advanced Course; passed that. Got 92%. So now I'm a qualified P.I. You see, I wanted the nitty-gritty and I wanted to get it right; and most of what that job entails is mundane stuff. Serving writs. In fact, my editor made me take out three or four pages that were describing this guy's activities as a private investigator, because, as she rightly said, it's boring. But I was showing off – to show the research I'd done. (That was the first time anything's been cut from *my* books...)"

"So the initial research was about three months, but then I research as I go along. The whole project was about two years, and for the first time I did drafts. In the past, I'd always written, then gone through it, crossed out, rewritten bits of it, but never actually re-written the whole thing. And I thought I'd just copy the whole thing out, only neater; but I started re-writing the whole thing. I wanted it to be good. I was very disturbed about some of the descriptions I give... in fact, I toned some of them down. I just wanted to do it until it was exactly right, because it would be so easy for people to say, you're exploiting disabled people. It's probably the best-written book I've done so far... but I hated doing it. I am proud of it... I'm *passionate* about it. I'm *passionate* about these poor people,

suffering in the way they have to suffer. It's very anti-Political Correctness because I don't believe in that. I don't believe that words can make people better. If someone is disabled, they're disabled: that's what they are. And I also think it's patronizing to those people. They're *not* the same as us, they acknowledge their disadvantage. So I was very strong on that."

A fictional actor who lived it up hedonistically in the 1940s is given the chance, while in Hell, to behave much better the next time around. The reincarnation is the detective – Nick Dismas – and he is physically disadvantaged in several ways. "The hero, Dismas, was based on someone I knew, who's now dead; and the heroine was based on someone I know, too. But it came to me – because I'm a Catholic – that Dismas was the name of the thief on the right-hand side of Christ on the Cross, and he redeemed himself. The whole book is about redemption. This guy pleaded with God to forgive him for his sins and be allowed into Heaven with Jesus Christ. So that was the idea with my character. I didn't labour the point, but the nuns called him that. 'Nicholas' has no significance whatsoever."

Dismas drinks heavily and takes drugs, and Herbert intended *Others* to have an anti-drugs message. "I don't do drugs myself, and you'll just have to take my word on that one," he states. "But I'm sure a lot of people are gonna accuse me of being a junky because of the way I talk about drugs. In fact, after I wrote *The Jonah*, my editor said, 'Jim, I didn't know you did Acid.' I never have. But he was convinced that I had because he was an old Acid-head and he said I got it right. You'll notice in my books, most of my heroes smoke, and I don't smoke; but cigarettes are a great technique when you're doing dialogue – to break things up. So I'm going to get accused of all sorts of things with this book that just aren't true."

During the writing of *Others*, he was even tempted to have a few more tipples himself than are customary. "*Others* racked me and wrecked me; and I rarely drink during the week when I'm working. I love a good drink but when I'm working I just don't. But several evenings, I had to go down and pour myself stiff vodkas, just because of the subject matter. I was depressed. And yet, there is a lot of humour in it. My wife wept at the end, but I thought the end was very optimistic."

"I have a huge mainstream audience, not just a horror audience," Herbert says. "There *are* the guys who like horror and nothing but, but then there are readers who enjoy good writing in general. A journalist said

years ago that Steve King and Herbert created their own genres, and it's true: people who don't even like horror read Steve's and my books. The state of horror fiction does not seem to be too healthy at the moment. I know so many good writers who are falling by the wayside; they're not being taken up again. Where Steve and I were lucky was, we did something new and we changed the face of horror: Steve in America and me over here. Then we had the good luck for *Jaws* and then *The Exorcist* film to come out shortly afterwards, and that all made for a good atmosphere, a level of acceptance."

In spite of Herbert's mockers, he does indeed have a large group of followers, which he explains (in part) by the fact that he tries something new every time. "No fan of mine knows what he's gonna get, and it's fortunate for me that they'll go along with that – and come along for the ride." Nor can it be disputed that over the last quarter of a century that he's been writing, he has influenced a particular school of horror fiction, whether he likes it or not. What does he think about this? "I should be flattered, I know, but I don't read them, I'm afraid. I don't read much horror anyway. I don't want to be influenced by other people. I know that Shaun Hutson, years ago, said he was going to take over my crown. But he seems to be doing the same old thing. As for imitators, I read a book and the guy – I won't give his name – had copied a sex scene from one of my books, from *The Ghosts of Sleath*. But even in copying, he got it all wrong. There are certain words you don't use with sex scenes. Sex to me is almost a spiritual thing; if you make love, you've got to bloody well make sure you do it well. And although I might have subsidiary characters who have bizarre, or even funny, sex, the main characters always have good, tender, loving sex. And there are certain words you do not use. Like 'balls,' 'knickers,' 'cunt.' It destroys the image of sex, and this guy just hadn't realized. It's got to come from within."

Talk of sex in writing leads to a conversation about Herbert's next project. "The one I'm doing next will be quite light. I want to go back to something like *The Magic Cottage*, but do something very different. I've got the perfect handle. I've got the location. And I want to make it erotic; I fancy a bit of that now. I don't know if it will be, it depends on what happens when I sit down to write; but it will be good erotic fiction, not pornography. Very sensual. I can't wait to get started; I hate being up here this week because I could be at home writing." His reasons for wanting to work

on more buoyant material now are the same as when he worked on *The Magic Cottage*: to release some of the darkness that has built up from the previous project. "I needed some light relief with *The Magic Cottage*. My whole aura, if you like, while writing that was light. It was set in summer and it's almost a fairy tale. I was in such a good mood, that's why I've enjoyed that book more than any other, that and *Fluke*. I didn't have to reach into the depths of my soul, which I usually have to do. Very wearing. I love humour and I think you need to have it to relieve the horror. Not every writer can do that. A lot of writers, you can tell, don't actually like *people*: it shows because no care has gone into their characters." (Herbert names names but stipulates that they are not to be used in the finished piece.) "When I used to be an artist – I was in advertising – I never liked drawing landscapes; I loved drawing people. I loved faces. I find people fascinating; everybody's got their own story, and a lot of people don't understand that."

In Herbert's career "there seem to have been watersheds. *Shrine* was a watershed: I'd suddenly arrived as a mature writer. *Portent* was another one; again, it was dealing with a very heavy subject with a lot of research. What's gonna be next I don't know. I don't think there are any watersheds left for me. Perhaps it'll be a very thin volume. I do it as it comes and hope I get better all the time. There's still a long way to go, and that's a good thing to acknowledge because it keeps me improving. I can't write a sentence now without interfering with it,

changing it. And I've also invented my own clichés," he continues. "The twist in every horror film, where the monster comes back – you think it's dead – well I did that in *The Rats*, I did that in *The Fog*. That's one of my clichés that everybody uses. I've got to try not to use it." But one thing that remains constant from novel to novel is the initial struggle of conception. "You have to build it all up," he says. The first third of the book is always the hardest; you come up against seemingly insurmountable problems. But finally it does get into a flow."

He has a reputation for being a stickler for detail, and for years called upon the experience of his advertising days to design his own covers. This is still the case, to a certain extent. "Well, they've been doing the jackets themselves, let's just say, under supervision. But they've been doing such good jackets that I don't need to sit there and do that as well. I like a nicely-packaged book. With *Others*, they printed it but the typeface was too small, so we ditched the whole lot and did it again. I want the reader to get the best package possible, because books are expensive. I always want the reader to keep my books. If only they could invent a paper that doesn't go brown with acid! The publisher and I owe it to the reader to give value for money... A writer depends on good publishing staff. For example, I used to get very annoyed. If a character was drinking 'whiskey' – with an E-Y – it was because he was drinking an Irish brand. That's the Irish spelling. And one editor crossed out all my Es. So that it was 'whisky' – which is the Scotch spelling. I was furious, because you rely on an editor to point that sort of thing out to you. You shouldn't have to point it out to them! Little things like that drive me potty."

One technique which he seems to have abandoned forever is the one he used in the early part of his career: that of leaving the physical characteristics of the main protagonist undescribed, the intention being to create a sort of Everyman in the reader's mind. "I stopped doing that, and started giving all the details about my characters, because it was time to do something else. It's such a broad canvas that I've got to play with that I can do all sorts of things, and having done the Everyman character, which was done so the reader would see himself or herself, I just got fed up with that."

When asked which character he feels closest to, he pauses before saying: "I feel close to every one when I'm doing them. The guy in *The Magic Cottage* was a compilation of myself, a friend who's a musician, and the actor Richard Dreyfuss.





There's something of me in all the characters, but none really stand out as being me." That said, he uses his characters (as all writers will) to sound off about heartfelt issues and opinions. "There's no deep, psychological reasoning, but I do get a lot off my chest through my characters – a lot of things that I get angry about. They can rant and rave, and they've usually got a good, slick reply, which doesn't happen in real life." And what does the lead character in *Sepulchre* imply about Herbert's own personality? "Well, the hero in that book wasn't a very nice guy, and the point was that sometimes evil can be used to defeat a bigger evil."

Although James Herbert does not regard himself as a political writer *per se*, he has plenty to offer on the subject. Notwithstanding his comments on *Portent* ("Portent was about the ecology, and it grew from seven years of research into events that happened all over the world – exaggerating them only a little bit and then bringing them all together, at which point you realize how prevalent these disasters are"), which might be construed as being obliquely

critical of political practices, he is happy to talk, once more, about *The Rats*. Indeed, in this case as well, he introduces the subject. "Take the Rats trilogy," he says. "What it was really about was, one, the neglect of inner cities. I'm from the East End and it was alive with rats, and I hate the way that both the Tories and the Labour Party ignored the plight of the East End. The rats were the system, and it was one man against the system. The system had created the rats. And the whole thing takes on an irony, a validation, with the last book (*Domain*), when they get to the underground shelter that the elite in society have had built for themselves. Except the elite have all been killed and mutilated – by the very system that they helped to create. That was the twist. And there was another twist: the rat embryos that resembled human beings. What I was saying there was, perhaps the rats were forerunners to ourselves. Which is why in a graphic novel I did (*The City*), it's all been twisted again, and the rats are dominant. I may do the book one day."

He does, on the other hand, regard himself as a spiritual writer, and sees

a strong vein of spirituality running through *Others*. "I'm very firmly a Catholic but the problem with me is, I don't enjoy organized religion. I don't like the dogma, I don't like the pomp; and I think the true message has gone out. But I acknowledge that it's all very important to some people. It ties them all together. I still go to church, but I don't have any problem about not going. If it's not doing me any good, why bother? On the other hand, maybe I'm just lazy and I like to lie in bed on a Sunday morning. I believe in God very much, and always have done, even when I was kid. But I'm a maverick, an outsider; I like to do things my own way."

"The headmistress of my daughter's school was furious with me. She'd read that I was a lapsed Catholic and that I go to church at Christmas and Easter, just to keep my foot in the door. The whole class had a debate about it. She said, 'Now then, Mr Herbert – he's a very nice man, but why does he say these things. They're very wrong things to say.' I wasn't there to defend myself or explain myself. People pigeon-hole you and put labels on you; and it's all in their own minds. They don't really know you."

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Let me call myself, for the present, Edgar A. Poe. The fair screen now shining before me need not yet be sullied by my full appellation. This has been already too much an object for the scorn, for the horror, for the detestation of my soul. To the uttermost region of the globe have not the indignant winds bruited its unparalleled infamy? Oh, outcast of all outcasts most abandoned – to the earth art thou not for ever dead? to its honours, to its flowers, to its golden aspirations? – and a cloud, dense, dismal, and limitless, does it not hang eternally between thy hopes and heaven?

Upon my writing-desk is a gruesome object in the form of a volume: cheaply-produced, ill-set, carelessly glued; issued not a year or two gone, but misdated through ignorance of the correct use of roman numerals. Less an edition than a falling from the presses, this book – for such we must call the damned thing, though so to do assaults our sensitive bibliophile vitals – is cast out to stalls and stores, for the penurious and the ignorant. It might be gawped over for an hour or two before its pages loosen like the leaves of October and are spilled in the streets. Upon its thin, ready-warped board cover is a rough, ugly woodcut: a grinning skull with eye-sockets too small, a downcast black bird with wings too large. And the title of this gathering of butcher's paper, as given on the ready-yellowed, coarse frontispiece, is:

## TALES AND POEMS by Edgar Allen Poe

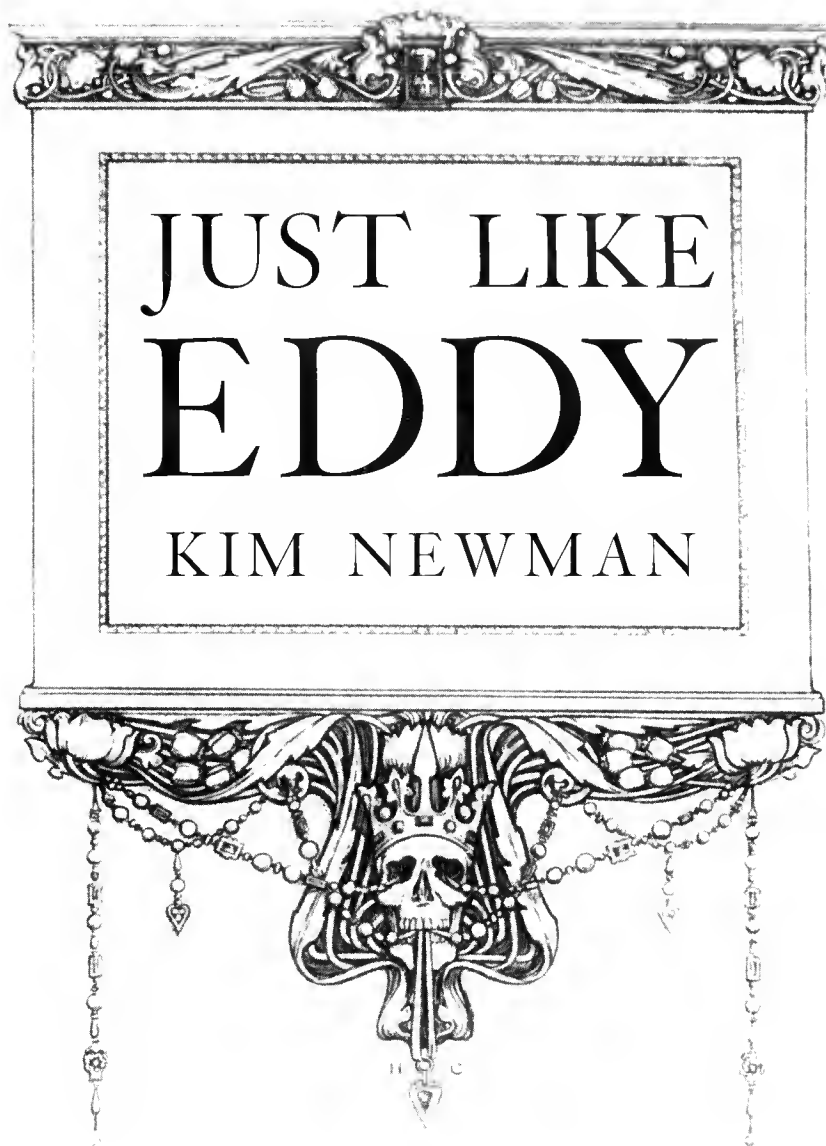
*Tales and Poems* need not concern us. The texts are a mish-mash, lifted entire through ingenious photographic process from several other editions so the face and size of type changes from page to page, from story to poem. Of course, many errors and misprintings are carelessly scattered throughout the copy, like seed strewn for chickens.

And there, on the frontispiece is the arch-error, the primal misprint, the eternal slip of the pen. Since I second ventured into the arena of print, dropping the dignified anonymity of "A Bostonian" – for so I signed my first published work, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* – to speak up for myself and proudly state my own, true name, to stand by my work and dare the world to take it and myself as they would, this has plagued me.

Edgar Allen Poe

Allen! Edgar Allen Poe! All-damned Allen! Always Allen, always. Allen! Allen! Allen! Though it is the work of a devil of the printer's variety, I cannot but think it also the product of the machinations of another of his breed, of more sulphurous and princely-yet-tenebrous mien.

Never am I rid of this phantom of my own making. The dreadful double has dogged me through the allotted span



of my life and persisted even beyond the supposed release of widely-reported death. Edgar Allen Poe mocks my aspirations to Art and Science, unpicks the threads of my tapestry, gnaws ratlike at the foundations of my endeavour.

Allen is my imp of the perverse, my goblin damned, my ravening ghoul, my frightful fiend.

For the love of God, shall I never be rid of E. Allen Poe!

I concede that the Allen is my own fault, that he is my creation. All evil that he is comes from within me, and he is all that is base and degraded in my person. Yet he has a damnable life of his own, beyond my conscious influence, and directed entirely towards the destruction of my self, my reputation.

What is a man's name if not his reputation, his soul?

Each time *his* name appears in print, my own is devalued, trodden into charnel filth and forgotten.

The appearance of Allen is not confined to cheap, pirated editions that skim my most renowned works and pass them off as the ravings of a madman and a degenerate. Allen appears in learned commentaries, obituaries, scholarly histories, popular lectures, biographies and bib-

liographies, broadsheets and magazines, the credits of motion pictures and television programmes, the collections of major universities, articles in every manner of publication, private letters that have strayed into the public purview, numberless schoolboy essays and compositions, plaques and honours and monuments. Immortalized a thousand thousand times, he is carried abroad through media undreamed-of at the time of his, and my, first fame. The thousand-and-third tale of Scheherazade is of his rise to prominence in this fabulous age of futurity.

Edgar Allen Poe rules, as the graffito has it; and I, *le vraisemblable* Edgar Poe, am lost, forgotten and impugned, cursed and doomed.

Like many of my sorrows, this has its beginning in the actions of the man who was never my father and acted indeed as no father to me.

I write, with distaste bitter still after more than a century and a half, of John Allan, of the trading house of Allan and Ellis. Upon the deaths of my true parents, David and Eliza Poe, I was taken as a babe into the house of Allan, a golden orphan, an ornament for the philistine businessman. With the death of his own wife, the devoted Frances, Allan began a programme of calculated torture by hope, dangling before me the prospect of wealth enough to support my literary endeavours but always snatching it away. My early failures, at university and West Point, can all be laid at the door of this Torquemada of the Modern Age, who mockingly refused either to cut me off and cast me out entirely or to finance properly my launch upon the literary world to which unasked-for poetical genius fit me.

When I was but two years of age, this creature prised apart my given name – Edgar Poe, honest and simple Edgar Poe of distinguished lineage – with prehensile fingers like those of a great orang-utan, and spat in his own patronymic, marking me forever as a man with three names (one invariably misspelled).

This is the most hideous irony of the situation. I care not for the name Allan and wish it were not mine. Truly, he had no right to force it upon me. In railing against the malforming error of Allen-for-Allan, I defend not myself but the man who more than any other mortal sought to ruin me, to stand between me and my rightful position.

Allan! John Allan! I only ever signed myself Edgar Allan Poe when communicating with my *soi-disant* stepfather, usually in signing missives stating my desperate need for funds, in the hope of pricking his elephant-hide to awaken a conscience that was in him stillborn. Such letters were invariably unanswered, perhaps left in the rack for weeks on end as John Allan pursued his own mean pleasures. I understand that in the writings composed during what is generally reckoned my lifetime, there survive only *two* minor instances of my use of the name Edgar Allan Poe, both from a period when I was unwisely tossing good emotional currency after bad by attempting reconciliation with a man beyond all decent feeling.

Many tales and poems and publications did I sign Edgar A. Poe. This, I admit, in mournful and never-ending remembrance. This, even, was a grievous, a ruining

error. I was born Edgar Poe. I am known as such to this day in that congenial country, France – the only blessed dominion where American geniuses on the scale of myself and the estimable Mr Lewis are fully understood and appreciated.

I should never have succumbed to the temptation of a middle initial. It is a sheer puffery, whereby many authors of mediocre reputation and talents attempt to inflate their own by-line to something with cachet, with status.

He speaks a profound truth who warns you to beware authors – and especially *authoresses*, most especially my countrywomen – with three names. It seems these thrice-named ones are often afflicted with a peculiar and unwholesome compulsion to foist upon the public their maunderings in as many volumes as they have names, and indeed to pile upon such trilogies with additional instalments unpromised and unsought-for until the shelves of the book-sellers groan with heartfelt pain.

I should have abandoned even the token of Allan's name, that odious initial, that alien and alienating A. I am and was proud of the Poes that came before me, the Revolutionary general and the great star of the stage. I found my only safe harbour amongst the circle of their relatives, my cousin-wife Virginia Clemm (my own darling Sissy) and her mother, Maria Clemm (my devoted Muddy). Yet – I curse my weakness and vanity, my shameful need for cash and the acute embarrassment of living always in a state of genteel beggary – the Poes were much reduced in circumstances, through no fault of theirs, and John Allan was, through no endeavour of his own, colossally rich. A wealthy uncle died and left him a hoard of Croesus, a fabulous treasure beyond even that secreted by the pirate Captain Kidd. The gold tempted me, prevented me from breaking fully with this cruel man.

With money, what might I not have done? My cherished project, a true literary magazine for America, might have come to fruition and proved a very great success, much to the benefit of the culture of my homeland, which has – for the want of an influence such as *The Stylus* might have provided – descended into a barbarous, illiterate and nightmarish stew of ignorance and vulgarity beyond even the blackest of my black imaginings. *The Stylus* would have proved a forum for the highest of artistic and political debate: it could have presented reasoned, definitive answer to those abolitionist fanatics who so dreadfully sundered the country but a decade after I passed from public notice, inflicting upon it a rapine from which it has never fully recovered and elevating to wasteful mastery the brutish and barely-human blacks who were in my youth so properly and mercifully chained. If we had been blessed with an income, my Sissy, rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Virginia, might have received proper medical attention and survived beyond her tragically brief lifespan, to bear me sons and daughters who would have carried on my name and done me honour.

Allan denied me, denied *America*, these blessings.

Yet, each time I was on the point of abandoning entirely all hope of aid from that quarter, some crumb, some trickle, would come from John Allan. By keeping



the ghost of his name within mine, and with each appearance of my name in print above a tale or a poem or an article or a work of criticism, I maintained the limping, lagging last of our relations.

John Allan passed out of my life, married again and with fat, bawling new heirs for his fortune. But, as he rode off in his gilded carriage to undeserved bliss, another appeared and crept from the shadows to torment me.

Edgar Allen Poe.

I cannot remember when he first appeared. It could not have been in any periodical for which I laboured in an editorial position: *The Southern Literary Messenger*, *Graham's Magazine* or *The Broadway Journal*. I was a proofreader of unmatched skill, as even those of my colleagues who became my bitterest foes would have been forced to acknowledge. When the matter was within my influence, I insisted upon the initial only, not the full name. Edgar A. Poe was safe, but Edgar Allan Poe was a dangerous venture which so often rebounded upon me.

No, Edgar Allen Poe must have been born in some other connection. Scratched on an envelope by a barely-literate tradesman, over one of the damnable reminders that elaborately bought to my attention some debt as if it were possible that I could with honour forget such a matter. Or perhaps it was printed above one of the many, *many* – mostly anonymous with the full cowardice such implies – attacks upon my work and character issued in publications that were the despicable organs of that canting gaggle of fools, knaves, toadies and dunderheads who then – as now! – made American letters their own frogpond, croaking at each other and their pitifully few indentured readers all the while contriving to do down and push under any truly original, important voice.

Was there initially malign intent? Surely, the first to have made the mistake – the *common* mistake, I have heard it called, though how such a lingering and deadly blight could ever be a commonality is beyond the confines even of my notoriously fevered brain – could not have known. No, it was *repetition* that had the power to bring into the world the fiend who built upon the foundations of John Allan and worked so devotedly towards my utter degradation and ruin.

At first, when grotesque tales reached me, I was indignant, certain that lies were being propagated by my so-called friends and acquaintances. Of course, none dared repeat such calumnies to my face, but I was always sensitive to whisperings, perhaps unnaturally so. His voice, Allen's, is always a whisper, a low-distinct and never-to-be-forgotten whisper which thrills to the very marrow of my bones, the whisper of a man dead yet unable to depart his mummifying corpse.

The world knows, or thinks it knows, my story. After my final break with Allan, I was forced to embark upon a perilous and rarely remunerative career in the employ of the periodicals of the day, all the while hoping in vain to combine pursuit of literary excellence with the plebeian necessity of earning a daily buck. Sole support of my sickly wife and her helpless mother, I took a succession of positions with a succession of publications, making for-

tunes for bloated and idle owners but not myself, and losing through my drunkenness or stubborn pride each employment, leaving behind only tales and poems that have lasted to this day and bad debts. It has been said, over and over, that I was a slave to the demon drink, that my condition was such that even a single glass of wine was enough to spin my brain into a frenzy, to send me on a binge that might last days and during which I was as one possessed, capable of any vice or insult, a terror to my friends and foes alike, yet so addicted to such stimulus that I would continue imbibing even to the point of physical collapse and, finally, death.

That, I maintain, was him.

Edgar Allen Poe.

Not I. Not Edgar Poe. Not, and it pains me to type the name to which I should never have laid claim, Edgar Allan Poe.

It was in Philadelphia, or perhaps New York, and after my Sissy had suffered the terrible onset of consumption, a vein in her throat exploding as her voice was raised in song, but before that dread disease took her away from me and robbed me of all hope for future happiness. I was writing so much and so fast that my fingers were permanently grooved by the pen and my hand was wrung out with constant pain. Suddenly, without premonition, I was no longer welcome in the offices of publications with which I had hitherto enjoyed a cordial connection. The private homes of many were similarly closed to me, and the staff of certain hostleries or stores began to give me a wide berth in the street.

Had I somehow, unknown to myself, been transformed into a pariah?

I overheard stories of my exploits. I had assaulted this prominent novelist with a savage fury, importuned the wife of that noted editor with unbelievable license. More than once, I found Sissy in tears and had to coax from her the substance of some misdeed she had overheard ascribed to me. I found myself dunned by bills – yes, in that hated phantom name, but with my actual address – that I knew for certain I had never run up.

There was only one possible conclusion, the impossibility that I might unknowingly be the subject of these fantastic tales having been justly excluded.

My double was at large, wrecking my life.

My *doppelgänger*, as the Germans would have it. Identical in every outward aspect, but inside a prodigy of evil, a warped mirror of my own self.

Many times, I was driven from home and position by Edgar Allen. He was a brawler and a drunkard, but possessed of the same canny intelligence that fired my own genius. I might be a pioneer among poets, but he was first among degenerates, as devoted to his calling as I was to mine.

I set out to find him, and put an end to this sorry business between us. I knew he could be no more than a projection, a ghost before his time, escaped from my body but attached by a golden thread. If I were to snap him back, then I would be free of him and he of me. We would be one mind, one soul. I was confident that I had the force of intellect and strength of character to deal with any ill influence he might have upon my thoughts.

It seemed that he was always just out of my sight. I might arrive at a place mere moments after his passing, which often put me in the position of answering for his misdeeds. My pursuit was dangerous, leading me to the receipt of many an unearned thrashing. Sissy and Muddy would tend my wounds, and worry over me, but my beautiful Sissy – her life leaking slowly, agonizingly away in a poetical tragedy of the first water – was in no condition to consider my poor health before her own. The walls appeared to be closing in on me and mine, and the scythe of death swished closer, ever closer, above the head of her whom I loved the most in all the world. It became paramount that I finish with this Allen, for only when he was a barely-discernible heartbeat within the tomb of my mind would I be free to devote full energies to my husbandly duties and to the higher work of literature.

As dogged and perspicacious as any detective, I traced the impostor through reasoning. He lead me from place to place, to other cities, and I apprehended that Allen was as intent on evading as Edgar was on ensnaring. In clues – the torn corner of a page scrawled with words in a caricature of my own hand, a button that upon examination I found missing from my own army greatcoat, lines of obscene verse scratched on the underside of a table in a low grog-shop – I found messages from him to me, from Edgar Allen to Edgar Poe. He could not bring himself to vanish into the mists, for he needed me at his heels to give his life purpose. Eventually, in dreadful and depthless despair, I realized he had almost won his final victory. In following him, I was compelled to venture into the dens of vice he frequented, and forced into many of the wretched habits that were his. Stories went back to Sissy and Muddy of me being seen in such-and-such a sinkhole of drunkenness and depravity; now, these tales were, in all particulars, sadly true.

The worst came when, after weeks in search of Edgar Allen, I decided finally to abandon the pursuit entirely. I purged myself of the obsession, and determined to let my rival go his own way. I would elevate my name so far above his that he could do me no harm. I returned to our poor home, bedraggled from my adventures and in a sorry state, to discover from Muddy that I was already in residence, closeted with Sissy, and that I had been so for some days.

Oh terror beyond imagining!

My home, shared with such tender and innocent souls, I had thought inviolate, “off-limits” as we said at West Point. Yet now it was transformed at a lightning-strike into a haunt of horrors, each familiar item of furniture or crockery become a mocking grotesque. My limbs would not serve me as I dashed for the stairs, and I seemed to plunge into a maelstrom of churning darkness. Our cat, a wise and humorous presence suddenly become a fire-eyed imp, was between my ankles, stretching out to undo my balance. Muddy, full as ever of concern for her Eddy, rushed to support me. At first bewildered by what she took to be my bilocation, that good woman became affrighted that I had fallen from an upstairs window and received ill-treatment, perhaps under the hooves of a horse, in the street. I found myself struggling with my wife’s mother, a true mother to me,

and terrifying her with my cries. The cat joined in with the sounding of ferocious mews, rendering my already-taut nerves like the strings of a violin sawed at by the devil’s fiddler.

Breaking free of Muddy, I ventured upstairs, dragging myself up by the bannister, conscious of a growing terror that made my heart a bellows and caused the blood to pound in my temples like a pagan drumbeat.

The door of the room I shared with Sissy, my wife-daughter-lover-child-muse-sister, hung open. Within, a candle burned with sickly greenish flame.

I stepped across the threshold, and found Sissy sprawled atop the covers of our bed, night-clothes rent, scarlet blood discharging from her mouth. Other flowing wounds, open and intimate, marred the whiteness of her tiny form. She had been sorely abused. I am convinced that it was on that night she truly began the long, slow, heart-breaking business of dying. This was the worst the fiend Allen could do, the crime that was beyond all forgiveness.

Howling, I glimpsed my own two evil eyes as I smashed the mirror on the wall. That was the nearest I came to seeing him, until much later.

After that, I lost some days to hysteria.

Sissy, of course, died. I had opportunities after that and continued to write as ever, but my darker double had the upper hand. He grew bolder, taking advantage of my increasing reluctance to venture beyond my hearth, to perform ever more fantastic and appalling acts in my approximate name.

Edgar Allen Poe was busy in those years.

His name was everywhere. My own was quite eclipsed. I lost a deal of money and alienated a publisher who might have advanced my cause greatly by insisting a printer destroy an entire edition of my two-volume *Tales of the Folio Club* because the hated Edgar Allen Poe had signed the introduction to this collection of my greatest stories. With that abortion was lost an original tale of mystery – in which the Chevalier August Dupin penetrates the tangled puzzle of “The Suicides of Saint-Germain” – that would doubtless have been ranked among my finest pieces.

Allen even trespassed into print.

Now, I could not tell you which of my later works were his and which mine. Most of the famous pieces, the stories and the poems, are and remain mine. Too much of the journalism, the fillers and the canting reviews of unreadable books, are his. The worst tragedy is *Eureka*, an unwilling collaboration. The original manuscript of this essay was mine, a clear-sighted and visionary work which would have placed my name alongside not merely Milton and Shakespeare but Newton and Galileo. After a period of protracted study and insight, a single-theory-of-everything came to me and I was able to contrive no less than an explanation in a manner that could not be mistaken of the material and spiritual nature of the universe itself. When the work appeared in print, it had been tampered with by my rival. Whole passages were rewritten so the meaning was horribly obscure, and the grand beautiful design marred beyond repair by per-

nicious nonsense and stretches that crudely imitated my own style and manner as if composed by a trained ape with a nasty knack for mimicry. My critics, firmly in the Allen camp, were savage and merciless. It was a setback I endeavoured to correct through lecturing and footnotes, but he had again lured me into evil ways and I could never reassemble my original version, could never recapture that moment of pure understanding that had prompted me to append such a thundercrack of a title to the book that should have been my finest but which became an embarrassment on a par with the poetry I tortured out of myself as a schoolboy.

The *Eureka* affair determined me to recommence my search for my enemy. Without a wife, I was less hampered by fear for my own safety. I was in my fortieth year, and the wrongs done me were stamped on my features. Implacable, purified by burning memory of the crimes against my soul, I turned about and looked for the trail.

It was late in the year of 1849 that I found him.

For months, I went from city to city, taking work as a lecturer and scribbler, capitalizing on a fame which was now as much his as mine. I realized many who came to see me perform were hoping for a display of Edgar Allen-like madness and degeneracy rather than Edgar Poe-like sense and artistry. They were, for the most part, disappointed though, as before, the nearer I came to my quarry, the more like him I became.

I was unwelcome everywhere. Reports came in from all quarters of my double. He had engaged in fist-fights with editors and critics and common sots. He had approached literary ladies as if they were gutter drabs. He had declaimed his genius – my genius! – in such a manner as to alienate all who might support me. He had made fantastical claims of the wonders of the coming ages, misrepresenting as prophecy those fictions of mine presented as cautionary tales. He had delighted in the morbid and ghastly aspects of my work, but scorned the beauties and wonders I sought also to realize. He made bad jokes, undermining my once-prized reputation as a delightful wit; he even had the temerity to pass off as mine “X-ing the Paragrab,” a leaden failure at humour on the subject, no less, of *misprints*.

Sometimes, I would lecture and *he* would take the money owed me, scattering it in the worst dives. He made a will that ensured the permanent blighting of my name, appointing my worst enemy – Rufus Griswold, Rough Rufus, Griswold the grisly – as my literary executor. For near a century, my works were always republished, ascribed as often as not to Edgar Allen, with a libellous biographical sketch by the ghastly Griswold which attributed to me all the misdeeds and imperfections of character of my foul persecutor.

We played tag throughout the cities of the Eastern United States, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Baltimore. I realized things had changed between us. He was hunting me, as I was him, and I feared he intended to do away with me, perhaps to wall me living in a cellar, and take my place.

I contrived in small ways to thwart him. In New York,

certain I was in danger of being murdered, I shaved my moustache to make a difference between us, so *I* would no longer be blamed for *his* crimes. This was a mistake; it made me, Edgar Poe, less the real man, and he, Edgar Allen, more the original.

It was night in the lonesome October, in the worst year of the century, and Baltimore was in the throes of a corrupt and hard-fought election. Then and there, I caught up at long last with my nemesis. I came upon him, and knew him for who he was, in an alley-way between taverns, steaming with the discharges of chronic inebriates, caked with a filth of loathsome putrescence.

Edgar Allen Poe was in a sorry state, a grotesque caricature of myself, having accepted many bribes of drink for each of the many votes he had cast for either of the candidates. At last, he was collapsed, shortly before sunrise, a tiny slug of a man. His clothes were shoddy, more threadbare even than those to which I was reduced, and he was as he had always been, a living spectre with a broken mirror for a face.

“Thou art the man,” I croaked.

It was but a moment’s work to wring the life out of him. But as I choked, he uttered words.

It was Edgar Allen; but he spoke no longer in a whisper, and I could have fancied that I myself was speaking while he said:

“You have conquered and I yield. Yet, henceforward art thou also dead – dead to the World, to Heaven, and to Hope! In me didst thou exist – and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered myself.”

These were my own words, cast back to me like an echo in my skull. They shook me to the core, and I hurried away, unseen by those who gathered about the stinking body on the cobbles.

Or was I the one gasping his last? And the shadow fleeing, my enemy?

He is buried, under my name. My miserly cousin Neilson Poe had me interred without marker. Later, he raised a subscription for a tombstone which was smashed – by a derailing locomotive – before it could be erected.

What was carved on that stone? His name, or mine?

I am what I am called, am whichever of us is invoked, and I shall be Edgar Allen as often as Edgar Poe. Each time the pernicious mis-spelling creeps into print the true Poe is beaked in the heart and the impostor reigns in illimitable triumph.

This is as it shall be, evermore.

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**Kim Newman**, one of *Interzone*’s “discoveries” many a long year ago (well, in 1984, to be precise), is best known as a novelist and film critic. His last stories here were “Teddy Bears’ Picnic” (with Eugene Byrne, issues 122-123) and “A Victorian Ghost Story” (issue 139). He lives in London.



## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Does Simon R. Green read this column? His latest blockbuster, whose title we instinctively forget, features “the acerbic social columnist Dee Langford, purveyor of unsuspected truths and assassin of reputations, whose pieces everybody read, if only to be sure they weren’t in them.” Next page, this shifty character dies horribly in a fire-fight.

## HORDES OF THE THINGS

**Colin Greenland**, as fiction editor of *Adhoc* (“Cambridge monthly magazine of culture and stuff”), is looking for cultured 500-word stories at £200 a go. Send c/o *Adhoc*, 35 Parkside, Cambridge, CB1 1JE.

**David G. Hartwell’s** editorial letter to reviewers, sent with proof copies of *Greenhouse Summer* by Norman Spinrad (Tor, November), offers an unusual reassurance: “Norman made a public fuss a couple of years ago about a mainstream novel that no one would buy. This is not it.”

**Liz Holliday**, editor of Britain’s other professional and fiction-publishing sf magazine *Odissey*, confirmed its death in July. There had been no issues since number 7 – dated 1998 and containing a “Christmas is coming” news item – which reached some though far from all contributors in mid-February 1999. Officially, “advertising wasn’t coming in fast enough to support us until our rising circulation brought us into the black.”

**Josh Kirby** does not deny the legends of his vast antiquity fostered by that chap Pratchett (“Jules Verne – such a kind man!”). The SF Foundation’s Andy Sawyer has now traced his early art book: *The perspective of architecture... deduced from the principles of Dr Brook Taylor, and per-*

*formed by two rules only of universal application*, by Joshua Kirby, 1761.

**George Lucas** gave us a little lesson in statistics: “This film cost \$115m to make. It’s got to be one of the top ten grossing films of all time just to break even. And not many films can do that. In fact, only ten even have.” (*Omnibus: The Story of Star Wars*, BBC, July)

**Terry Pratchett** had fun with the *Sunday Times*: “I wrote an article for them on the British and Fantasy in which I used the word ‘numinous’. The sub-editor, and they train them well on the *ST*, assumed this had to be a mis-typing of *luminous*, and duly corrected it. ‘Luminous and invisible’... well, it’s certainly poetic in a strange kind of way...”

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**All the Sounds of Fear.** Peter Jackson, director of the coming three-part Tolkien movie from New Line Cinema, chillingly declared: “*The Lord of the Rings* is a classic English story. However, I think that New Line is concerned that having no American accents will alienate a US audience...” Shooting begins this year. Recalling Disney’s *Winnie the Pooh*, we eagerly await the “Of Herbs and Stewed Gopher” scene.

**Mythopoeic Fantasy Awards.** Adult Literature: Neil Gaiman & Charles Vess, *Stardust*. Children’s: Diana Wynne Jones, *The Dark Lord of Derkholm*. Scholarship (Inklings): Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Companion & Guide*. Scholarship (Rest of Universe): Donna R. White, *A Century of Welsh Myth in Children’s Literature*.

**As Others See Us.** *Liam Neeson* favoured *Woman’s Hour* listeners with his subtle insight about That Movie: “Of course, it’s not science fiction, because science fiction is set in the future and this film is set a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...” *Brian Sewell* showed how closely art critics keep up with science and sf, in a July *Evening Standard* rant: “It must by now be obvious to all sane men that space exploration has been and is a fatuous pursuit, for such technology as we have tells us that no man can survive the atmospheres of other planets even in our galaxy, let alone the galaxies beyond and beyond. Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov, however, continue to nurture schoolboy fantasies and cost us dear when grown men and governments refuse to relinquish the prepubertal ambitions they engender...” And BBC Radio 4’s *Open Book* (30 July) devoted

10 minutes to alternative-history sf, now renamed “Counterfactuals” in a snobbish effort to sever all links with horrid sci-fi. *Presenter*: “This sort of thing might seem to be science fiction but now it is the subject of mainstream literature.”

**R.I.P.** This summer we lost two more sf fan notables. Chuck Harris (1927-1999) was prominent in 1950s British fandom, helping found such institutions as Walt Willis’s legendary fanzine *Hyphen*; made totally deaf by meningitis during the war, he poured his energy into reams of rude, irreverent and funny correspondence which appeared in fanzines worldwide and continued until his death. George ‘Lan’ Laskowski, who twice won the Hugo for Best Fanzine with *Lan’s Lantern*, died of cancer at age 50.

**Small Press.** Iron Press is recklessly reading for *Star Trek–The Poems*. Maximum 3 poems per person, with SAE; 40 or fewer lines; closes 1 Jan 2000. “Submissions in Klingon must be accompanied by a full translation.” 95 Queens Rd, Whitley Bay, Northumberland, NE26 3AT.

**Oh No, Not Again.** There’s a bid to bring the World SF Convention to Britain (Brighton or Glasgow) in August 2005. SAE for information to UK in 2005, 379 Myrtle Rd, Sheffield, S2 3HQ.

**Thog’s Masterclass.** “She rose, opening the carriage door and leaning out to pull her tethered horse up from behind the carriage and then quite literally flowed onto his back.” (David Eddings, *Domes of Fire*, 1992) *Dept of Lit Crit*: “In 2012, nine-year-old Prabir Suresh and his toddler sister Madhrusree live on an uninhabited Moluccan island...” (Russell Letson reviewing Greg Egan’s *Teranesia*, *Locus* 7/99) “As a contribution to natural history, the book is negligible.” (*The Times* on *The Wind in the Willows*, 1908) “Sometime, a few minutes or a few years or a few hundred years from now... something living would be coming down the tunnel. Something living. Breathing, perhaps. / Food! / A ripple of a thrill ran down its suckered tentacles, as it savoured – years in advance? – its forthcoming repast!” “His jungle-trained mind had taught him to use his mind for the purpose for which it was intended.” (both Barton Werper, *Tarzan and the Silver Globe*, 1964) “Under the chapka [a kind of hat], the impassive beauty of her features has the tender translucence of uncooked chicken breast, catching, at the extremities, the lavender tint of the winter sky.” (Adrian Mathews, *Vienna Blood*, 1999)

Looking back on the biggest single event in sf history, I don't think we particularly got mugged. Over its lifetime, *Star Wars* has been blamed for a lot of things: for turning cinema over to the dark side, with the death of film and the invention of modern movie-and-merchandising product; for the overthrow of the golden-age sf republic of text by the empire of the big dumb media object. There's certainly a share of truth in all of this. In particular, though the fantasy gaming boom of the same era must carry some share of the responsibility, *Star Wars* did largely create the modern sf universe: a galaxy of drastically reduced intelligence ruled by the media rather than the written word, and populated not with hardback originals and fiction magazines but with action figures and models, young-reader novelizations and comics, celebrity conventions and costume fandoms, and websites, websites, websites. It's easy for rebel-alliance types to get judgmental about this world and that. But *Episode I* is arguably the first work of modern sf to exploit the poetics of the franchised universe as an artform in its own right – doing genuinely new and extraordinary things with science-fiction cinema that are only appreciable if you have enough of the ten-year-old anorak in you to be touched by the spell of what cross-media mythologies can do.

The key thing about the new breed of sf work is that it conforms to the model that myth scholars call a *megatext*: a dynamic, transformational narrative corpus in which individual stories are (a) part of a larger, coherent arc; (b) internally cross-referenced by a network of echoic story patterns. It's also an opus that transcends the individual textual embodiment, and indeed individual media, to be invoked iconographically in a host of culturally-significant contexts like, say, the back of Frosties packets. Until 1999, the most highly evolved sf megatext was the *Star Trek* franchise – which still has some claim to rival the Marvel universe as the largest single narrative artefact in the history of human culture, but is by now in a genteel but irreversible decline which *The Phantom Menace* positions itself neatly to exploit. The *Star Wars* insurgence strikes at a time when space movies are almost extinct, and the kind of widescreen space opera popularized by the series opener has shrivelled away to the small screen and grimly televisual narrative values, only partly compensated by the increased space for narrative sprawl

Nick Lowe

MUTANT POPCORN

*Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace. Jar Jar Binks takes a moment...*

and arc afforded by the weekly series format.

Not the least of *Episode I*'s achievements here is simply to show off how current developments in digital cinema are making this kind of classical sf visually feasible in new ways. At last, and in gorgeous contrast to the original trilogy, we can have landscapes that don't look like terrestrial locations, aliens that don't look like humans in suits or puppeteered latex figurines. Even two years ago, when the *Special Edition* footage appeared, the technology wasn't really up to doing this convincingly. Now, you could happily spend an entire 135 minutes just watching the establishing shots of Naboo city (total perhaps 25 seconds of screen time) on a loop.

But these are comparatively incidental to what this film does with and within its megatextual framework. The crucial thing about *Episode I*, and the key to its total success as an authentic interplanetary epic that utterly transcends the clonking ineptitude of its creator's fascinatingly immature imagination, is that *everything of significance* in this movie actually happens in other films, the most important of which don't even exist. The story of Naboo's invasion and deliverance is consequential only in the most literal sense: things that happen along the way (Palpatine's coup, Darth Sidious' loss of his padawan martial artist, Anakin's adoption by the Jedi and meeting with Amidala) set off chains of events that will eventually escalate to true epic scale in a saga that maps nothing less than the rise and fall of a galactic empire. Yet *all* of these consequences are far in the future of these characters in this story – and some of them are anything but self-evident to the mature spectator, who probably will have no idea what the name "Senator Palpatine" conveys, and will thus spend the remaining 90 minutes watching a completely different movie. And what makes *I* all the more resonant is that by far the most interesting chapter of the megatextual saga is the material spanned by

*Episodes II* and *III*, of which only very broad outline details have ever been available – so that the events of *Menace* vibrate in the imagination with evocative hints and possibilities, all of which are bound to be damped when the oscillations collapse in a final definitive version. The power of the *Star Wars* saga, and especially of *The Phantom Menace*, is that for most of our lifetimes the heart of the story has remained, and still remains, almost entirely untold.

This is largely, of course, because George Lucas is a congenitally indecisive tinkerer with his jealously-licensed mythocosm, further boxed in by incautious throwaways fixed in stone by the first Episode, so

that for most of a quarter-century he can't have had much more clue what the Clone Wars were than we have.

But this is precisely what makes the *Star Wars* cycle unique.

Unlike *Star Trek*, *X-Files*, and other franchised realities, *Star Wars* is essentially one man's lifelong private mythology. I'm not aware of any documentation on this (of the kind that exists, for instance, for

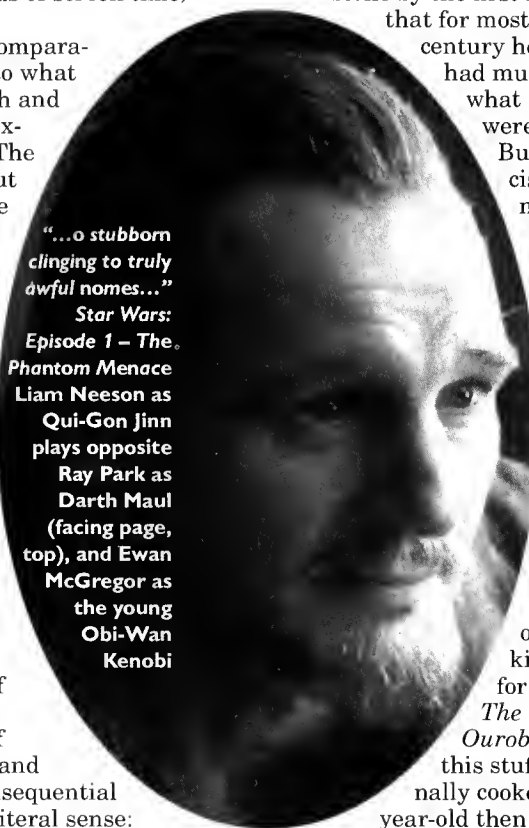
*The Worm Ouroboros*), but if this stuff wasn't originally cooked up by a ten-year-old then it does a

brilliantly convincing impersonation of it. Lucas's own handling of the material certainly has all the hallmarks: lifelong dithering and a terminal reluctance to crystallize a single definitive narrative; a tendency to work in scenes and incidents rather than complex, structured plotlines; and a stubborn clinging to truly awful names. (Somewhere in the millennium-spanning secret history of the Sith before Lords Sidious and Vader must be the exploits of the lost Darths Fibulation, Secticide, Fluenza, and Dustrial-D'terjent.) In this connection, one of the most beguiling things about *Menace* is that the words coming out of mouths are for the first time almost entirely the unretouched writing of George Lucas, and the cast who speak them are almost entirely

competent. At last George can ditch the cast of deadweights and second-raters he was stuck with for the first trilogy, and it's truly a pleasure to watch all these wonderful players delivering Lucas dialogue for all the world as though it was speakable.

But right from the opening sequence, very strange things start to happen. Young Obi-Wan's first test is to deliver his grand entrance line from the lips of an actor playing another actor playing a version of this character who doesn't yet exist. And the line itself? He throws back his hood and says "I have a bad feeling about this." This astonishing moment is one of the most audacious face-slaps ever administered on an audience. First reaction, and for many the only reaction called for, is the shock of the naff: the single most eagerly-awaited line of dialogue in the history of cinema turns out to be one of the six or seven most vapid movie clichés in the lexicon. But even a padawan *Star Wars* sadcase will twig that the reason it's a cliché in the first place is that it was Han Solo's catchphrase from *A New Hope*; and that the line means something quite different coming from a Jedi, whose bad feeling is an altogether more authoritative and metaphysically-underpinned awareness of big plotting to come. So what does it all *mean*? That the mildly impetuous younger Obi-Wan is this film's Han Solo? That even the lines these characters speak is being Force-fed to them by uncredited midi-chlorean script doctors as part of a kind of cosmic intertextual play to underscore the cyclic timelessness of myth? Or just that, half a lifetime on, George still can't think of a better line to write?

The verdict is ours: as Qui-Gon says, "your focus determines your reality," and here as throughout it's entirely up to us to decide what kind of a film we think we're watching. Thus, for example, a genuinely attractive quality of the megatextual arc, though presumably prompted by nothing more profound than the need to recycle as many familiar characters and settings as possible, is the unexpected degree of entanglement in the different plotlines: the centrality of Tatooine and its previously-established subcultures to all chapters of the story; the way R2 and 3PO seem to be set up to wander in and out of the story by a series of Forceful coincidences. Stranger still, but also part of the megatextual mythuality of a story with resonances larger than its banalities, is the extensive palimpsesting in *Menace* of incidents and set pieces from *A New Hope*, from the the opening battle and escape to Tatooine right through to the final attack on the Death Star. Here



"...o stubborn clinging to truly awful names..."  
**Star Wars:**  
*Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace*  
 Liam Neeson as Qui-Gon Jinn plays opposite Ray Park as Darth Maul (facing page, top), and Ewan McGregor as the young Obi-Wan Kenobi

again, it's amazingly hard to judge how clever or naïf or both Lucas is being here: the implication is presumably that some Force is constraining narrative into quasi-archetypal patterns that merely *look* like dodgy plotting by an out-of-shape screenwriter who ran out of ideas in 1979.

For the nagging truth about George Lucas, filmmaker and master of the galaxy, is that he is a man honed by nature to shoot second unit. He still can't plot, can't write dialogue, can't direct humans; can edit a little; when on form, is a wizard with storyboards; but is clearly more comfortable in his mature career as a Medici of the digital arts than as a maker of films in his own name. His approach to the art of direction borders increasingly on autism, giving actors notoriously little direction on set, and preferring instead to do his directing in the editing suite by cutting and pasting individual performances from different takes. And there's no denying that this "shoot first, ask questions in post-production" approach to filmmaking has left some deep scars on the finished product. It's quite clear, for example, that Lucas never made up his mind how to resolve the Amidala/Padmé confusion (of which the novelizations, particularly the first-person Amidala juvenile, tie themselves in exotic alien knots trying to make sense). There is, I am now willing to swear, no coherent, consistent, and rational way to determine which character you're watching in several of the key scenes of emotion and decision on Naboo and Coruscant, and no way at all to explain the choices of accent (or which is her "real" one). Since this is one player whose inner life carries some investment for subsequent developments, this is quite a serious problem, particularly for a film destined to be scrutinized on repeat viewings in the way that modern media sf megatexts invariably and intrinsically are.

But then bad plotting has always been George's master suit. The defining feature of Lucas's writing is the extreme transparency of his narrative substructure; and this time around he's surpassed even himself, with his three heroes' Jedi senses working overtime to foreshadow everything in the story. "I sense an unusual amount

of fear for anything as trivial as this trade dispute." "Be wary. I sense a disturbance in the Force." "I foresee you will become a great Jedi knight." "I had a dream I was a Jedi. I came back and freed all the slaves." "Will I see you again?" – "What does your heart say?" – "I

guess." (Much more of this in the novelizations, whose material presumably emanates from earlier versions of the script – including Annie saying to Padmé, within moments of meeting, "I'm going to marry you some day.") Sometimes the ways of the Plot are so shamelessly transparent that they take the breath away – as where Annie finds his plotline locked on to the final set-piece, and exclaims "Look, there they are! *That's* where the autopilot's taking us!"

Even this is trumped, however, by what must surely be the most brilliant stupid idea ever coined in an sf movie: the revelation that everyone in the entire universe is infected with microcolonies of plot flora which mediate the storyline to the characters, and at key points in the arc can even spontaneously generate protagonists by donor-inseminating human actresses. Had Larry Kasdan or any of George's other quondam writing chums been in harness, the first thing they'd have surely said is "George, George, keep the charmless kid, keep the comedy alien of colour, even keep John Williams trying to orchestrate ethnic, but *for pants'* sake lose the immaculate-conception story viruses". And thank the pants that no such advice was heard, because the midi-chlolean concept is precisely the kind of poo-detectors-to-manual stroke of utter imbecilic genius that makes *Star Wars* so iconic and seminal. For this time around, the Force is absolutely real. There really is a sentient destiny shaping every event in the film, and to an emergent extent the two unmade ones, along its own inexorable path, because this is the first

sf film to be set in a long-ago far-away future's past, and we know exactly where these characters are bound.

The result is to make what on its own terms is merely a lavish, well-crafted juvenile into a film of quite unmerited resonance and charge, whose avoidance of any form of complex adult emotion becomes one of its core resources. My own second viewing of *The Phantom Menace* was a 10am showing in the week of release at a multiplex screen one; I was the entire audience, and to be intimately alone in a big dark place with this vast, beautiful folly was one of the most uplifting cinema experiences you could have. Given that the curse and the gift of any *Star Wars* movie is that it has to be a *Star Wars* movie, it's hard to imagine the franchise ever delivering a better product – and unlikely that it will in the future, since Lucas has offered a near-impossible hostage to fortune in banking on his ability to make the themes grow up with the characters (while somehow retaining the pre-teen target audience addressed by the raft of merchandising on which the cycle's autonomy depends), and to deliver convincing romance and darkness in the unmade instalments.

Confidence isn't encouraged by the suggestion that what turns tousle-haired pod-racing tykes into psychotic planet-destroying Dark Lords of the Sith is not, for example, being born of a virgin and lumbered with a girl's name, but being sent off from mummy's arms to Jedi prep school at age ten (in which case it's surprising we don't see more red lightsabres in the British upper house). Still, *Episode III* will be quite an old man's film, and it's never too late to grow up; while it certainly

doesn't hurt that the two key players to carry through to *Episode II* are nice bits of casting with daft interplanetary accents you could listen to all day. Adults may ask what kind of planetary democracy elects a 14-year-old monarch whose decoy seems just as good at making decisions of state; but the ten-year-old in us knows that two more whole films of her big hair and humungous space frocks is more than enough excuse for \$150M of our toy money.

Nick Lowe





# The Woman Who Saved the World

*Jamie Barras*

**14 November 1990**

She may be a little waterlogged, but this ship's not for sinking. Geoffrey Howe's vile act of bile and treachery has set the rats to packing, but my Margaret is made of far sterner stuff. She has proven time and time again that she is a woman of infinite resolve and limitless reserves; there's none better anywhere, nor more able. Worried by the murmuring of a few treacherous malcontents? Not my Margaret. Not the woman who saved the world.

**5 May 1979**

"Aliens? Invading earth?"

"Aliens invading earth, Denis."

"My God," I said. "My God." I lowered the phone and stared at it in disbelief. Then I placed it back against my ear and said, "I think I need to sit down."

Even before Margaret's call, the day had already proved to be a very trying one for me. Shunted into a side room for tea and biscuits while Margaret met with Her Majesty, trailing two steps behind her like a Bombay houri on the tour on Number 10, I'd felt like the third wheel on a bicycle all day. I was glad of the chance to escape to our place at Scotney at the end of it all, and was quite looking forward to a peaceful, relaxing weekend. And then Margaret rang.

I moved the phone over to my easy chair and left it there while I crossed over to the bar to fix myself a stiff drink. Then I went back and sat down. I took a belt, settled myself into the chair, then picked up the phone for a third time and said, "Now, my love, what's this about an alien invasion?"

It was late evening on that hectic first day in office before Margaret could excuse herself from her public duties to

meet with the First Sea Lord and Sir Frank Cooper of the MoD. They had waited all day to see her. Margaret walked into the Pillared Room at Number 10 expecting a briefing on the worsening situation in Rhodesia, only to find that the First Sea Lord had come to inform her of a very different crisis.

"Ma'am," he said, "as fantastical as this sounds, in four days from now alien beings may very well launch an attack on this planet."

Sir Terence, later Lord, Lewin, was an old destroyer man and a veteran of both World War II and Korea. His clear-headed leadership of the Defence Staff would later prove an important factor in Margaret's victory in the Falklands War. He was, in short, an unlikely source for such an extraordinary statement.

"Alien beings?" Margaret said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're being serious?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"If you'll allow us to explain, ma'am," Sir Frank Cooper put in. Sir Frank was a civil servant of the old school and something of a wet. That said, the events of that momentous week in May of '79 would turn him into one of Margaret's staunchest supporters inside Whitehall. "The aliens in question think we have one of their people," he said. "But when they get here and find out we don't have him, there could, as Sir Terry said, be a problem."

"If we don't have him then why do his people think we do?" Margaret said.

"Because that's what the Americans told them, ma'am."

"Why on earth would the Americans tell them a thing like that?"

"Because that's what we told the Americans, ma'am."

That had Margaret stumped. At length she said, "I think you had better start from the beginning."

"On 8 July 1947," Sir Frank said, "an alien spaceship



crashed on Dartmoor.”

“Dartmoor? Our Dartmoor?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“At about the same time,” the First Sea Lord added, “a second alien spaceship crashed near Roswell, New Mexico.”

“That’s in the South-west United States, ma’am,” Sir Frank said.

“I know where New Mexico is, Sir Frank,” Margaret snapped. As Sir Frank had just discovered, Margaret’s previous term as a minister, in Ted Heath’s Government of ’70-’74 had left her with no tolerance for being talked down to by civil servants.

“Did we shoot down these alien ships?” she said.

“No, ma’am,” the First Sea Lord replied. “The alien ships shot down each other. They were belligerents, participants in a war between two rival galactic powers, the Dagutusi and the Luteel. But that’s not our concern at this time.”

“It isn’t?” Margaret said, incredulously. She was beginning to find the First Sea Lord’s matter-of-fact delivery of the most extraordinary statements maddening.

“No, ma’am,” the First Sea Lord said. “Our only concern is the fate of the alien crews. The fact is there was a survivor.”

“From which crash?” Margaret asked.

“Dartmoor, ma’am.”

Margaret felt a strange stirring of pride, as if the survival of the alien that crashed in England in itself constituted some kind of victory over our American cousins. “So what happened to this survivor?”

“We kept it, ma’am,” Sir Frank said, “in a sealed room down a salt mine in Cheshire. Our air was poison to it, so there wasn’t much else we could do.”

“Only the xenobaric chamber sprang a leak,” the First Sea Lord said, “about two years after the crash, and, well, the alien died.”

“Two years after the crash?” said Margaret. “Thirty years ago? Then why on earth do the Americans still think it’s alive today?”

Instead of answering, the First Sea Lord and Sir Frank exchanged a look.

“Well?” Margaret pressed.

“Because, ma’am,” the First Sea Lord said with some hesitation, “on the orders of Prime Minister Attlee we replaced our dead alien with a stand-in.”

“You see, ma’am,” he went on, before Margaret had a chance to respond, “the Dartmoor ship blew up more or less on impact, but the Roswell craft was almost intact.”

“So we had the crew but no spaceship.”

“Whereas the Americans had the spaceship but no crew.”

“So Prime Minister Attlee and President Truman struck a deal,” Sir Frank said, “*quid pro quo*: we would give the Americans access to our alien in return for them giving us access to their alien spaceship.”

The First Sea Lord then attempted to justify Attlee’s actions. “The Dartmoor alien died just two weeks after the Soviets exploded their first atomic bomb, ma’am,” he said. “The world was in crisis. Prime Minister Attlee decided that we simply couldn’t afford to lose access to the alien technology, with all the advantages it might

give us over the Soviets. So he ordered us to replace the alien with a stand-in.

“And it worked like a charm. To this day the Americans have never suspected a thing.”

Sir Frank cleared his throat. “Which is why, ma’am, when the Dagutusi regime contacted the Americans two days ago, the Americans told them that their missing pilot was alive and well and living in Cheshire. And, as a gesture of goodwill and understanding between our two peoples, we would be happy to hand him back.”

“Alive and well,” the First Sea Lord repeated for added emphasis.

“Not sliced into little pieces and pickled in alcohol,” Sir Frank said.

“Ah,” Margaret said. “Ah.”

The whole human race faced destruction because of a 30-year-old lie about the life and death of a little green man. Madness. “What kind of monsters would go to war over something as insignificant as this?” I said, revolted.

“Desperate ones, Denis,” Margaret said. She was never the one to be fooled by an imposing façade. “The aliens’ message to the Americans made it clear that their little war didn’t quite go their way. So they’re on their way here in search of a hero, do you see? Someone to distract their public from their failure to deliver victory.”

Her voice grew more and more scornful. “And if they can’t give their people a hero, they will give them a villain – us. That’s why they will attack – for no other reason than to pander to public opinion at home.

“Typical bully-boy tactics,” she jeered. “The last resort of a morally and militarily bankrupt regime.”

But then she sighed and became more subdued. “The actions I take now could decide the future of the entire human race,” she concluded in a voice suddenly heavy with fatigue.

“You’ll win through, my love,” I said. “You always do.”

She sighed again. “Will I, Denis?”

“Yes, my love. Remember: ‘Where there is despair, may we bring hope’. That’s you, my love, the bringer of hope to the world.”

“Oh, Denis,” she said. “What would I ever do without you. What a man you are. What a man. What a husband. What a friend.” Then after a pause she said, “Come home. Tonight.”

Her voice was rich and low with longing.

I wasted no time in getting to my car.

## 6 May 1979

“I appreciate that you’re incensed, Mr President. And certainly questions do need to be asked. I just think that at this moment in time our energies would be better spent deciding what we’re going to tell the alien envoy, don’t you?”

It was early afternoon in London, early morning in Washington. Margaret had been kept busy all day keeping up appearances. The media expected her to name her cabinet, meet with her new ministers; get down to the business of government. She accomplished all those things – and more. But her mind never for a moment left off thinking about the crisis facing an unsuspecting world.

"No, Mr President, it isn't at all obvious to me that we should 'come clean'."

Margaret was in the inner sanctum of her Private Office. With her were Ian Gow, her newly-appointed parliamentary private secretary – who would later die at the bloody hands of the IRA – Sir Frank Cooper, and dear old Francis Pym, the new Defence Secretary, who had been wandering around with an expression like a startled rabbit ever since Margaret broke the news.

"I appreciate that, Mr President. Clearly this is a challenge, but we must not shrink away from it. We must be decisive, bold –"

The alien fleet was less than four days away from earth. The aliens were expecting the Americans to contact them with details of how the pilot hand-over would be handled in two days time. The first thing that Margaret had to do was persuade the Americans not to let the cat out of the bag.

"No, Mr President, that would be an invitation to disaster! My Defence Staff tell me that everything we know about these beings points to them taking some kind of aggressive military action."

President Carter favoured appeasement. He saw it as our only hope in the face of the aliens' overwhelming military superiority. His caution should not be mistaken for timidity, however. It was a brave man that so much as mentioned the word "appeasement" in the hearing of a British Prime Minister.

"Yes, Mr President, this is the same Defence Staff that has been lying to the Pentagon for the past 30 years. And the reason I'd rather listen to them than the Pentagon is that they haven't spent those 30 years believing that a dwarf in a spacesuit and a rubber mask is a being from another world."

"Will the Americans really follow your lead?" I said.

"Yes," Margaret assured me. "If I lead them somewhere they want to go."

Margaret and I were together again at our house on Flood Street. Carol and Mark were there too. Carol had remarked on my premature return from Scotney, but seemed satisfied by Margaret's explanation that I had come back to support her in her first days in office. It pained me that we couldn't tell our own children of the danger facing the world, but at the same time I wouldn't have dreamed of inflicting on them the anguish that I was experiencing.

One possible solution to the larger problem had already occurred to me. "Couldn't we call on these other alien types, these 'Luteel,' for help?"

"That would only mean exchanging one alien overlord for another – without even a fight," Margaret said.

"Then we will just have to save ourselves," I said with a determination I didn't feel. But it had the desired effect on Margaret.

"Yes, we will," she said with real determination. "No matter what it takes."

"What we need is a galactic super-weapon," I said. That was something else I'd had on my mind. "There was this book I read – years ago now, in the army – where the earth types were facing certain doom, but just in the nick of time the hero brings out –"

"Oh, Denis!" Margaret exclaimed. She grabbed me by the shoulders. "You're the wisest, cleverest man I know."

"I am, my love?" I said. "Oh."

## **7 May 1979**

On the Bank Holiday morning there was a full meeting of the Defence Council at Number 10. Margaret had a question.

"How soon could the Americans make the Roswell UFO ready to fly?" she asked the First Sea Lord.

"They've already brought her back up to combat readiness, ma'am," Sir Terry replied. "But, ma'am—" he smiled indulgently "— if you're contemplating attacking the Dagutusi fleet and blaming the Luteel, might I remind you that the Roswell craft is a 30, if not 40, year-old design. The Dagutusi would spot the disparity long before it got anywhere near their fleet."

"Thank you, admiral," Margaret said with real venom. "Thank you for explaining to me something that would be obvious even to a child." The First Sea Lord withered beneath her glare. "I have something quite different in mind," Margaret said.

## **10 May 1979**

The rain stopped and the clearing grew eerily quiet.

"They're here, ma'am," Sir Frank Cooper said.

Margaret looked up into the night sky and saw a single, small bright star. As she continued to watch she saw that the star was slowly falling towards them.

"Is that it?" she said. She was expecting something bigger.

Sir Frank cleared his throat. "That... that's its landing light, ma'am," he said.

"Oh," said Margaret.

The rain hadn't stopped at all. It was just no longer reaching the ground.

"Okay, Ned," Sir Frank said. "Time to go to work."

"Oh Christ," Ned said. "Oh Lord. Oh bugger."

Ned stood a little less than four feet tall. He was wearing a spacesuit and a rubber mask.

"Ready for one last performance, Mr Sparks?" Margaret said.

Ned Sparks bared his teeth. The facemask made it hard to tell, but Margaret didn't think that he was smiling. She could see that the little man's resolve was in need of some bolstering. "Your actions here tonight will earn you the gratitude of the entire world," she told him.

"Don't tell my agent that," Ned said, refusing to be swayed, "or he'll expect ten percent."

"Oh Lord, it's huge," a voice behind them called out in a Georgia drawl. A second later, the American president joined them. He had his military aide, Major Lippenbakker, with him. Lippenbakker was built like a prop forward, aptly suited to the job of carrying the famous 'nuclear football'. But for tonight only he was without the missile codes. He had left them with the vice president, who was tucked away somewhere inside a mountain in West Virginia.

"This will never work," the president said, staring

wide-eyed at the huge black underbelly of the descending alien ship.

Margaret liked Jimmy Carter personally, but she didn't think much of him as a president. She found him indecisive and reluctant to take action. But in her eyes his greatest failing was that he was unlucky. Margaret agreed with Napoleon, to achieve greatness a leader must possess an abundance of luck. And Margaret was always lucky.

She would rather have done without the president's presence altogether but alas the occasion – the first 'official' contact between humanity and beings from another world – demanded that he be there. The alien envoy would expect nothing less.

"This will work," she assured the wavering leader of the free world, "if we continue to stand together. Because there isn't anything we can't achieve if we stand together, side by side. Now, shall I lead the way?"

She pointed towards the centre of the clearing.

The alien ship ceased its silent descent about 300 feet from the ground. A door slid open in its underbelly, spilling soft yellow light over the clearing. A moment later, the light flickered: the launch carrying the alien envoy and his staff was on its way.

"Everybody to first positions," Sir Frank said.

"Oh Christ," Ned said. "Oh Lord. Oh bugger." Then with a heavy sigh, he turned to the president and said, "That's our cue, sir."

Ned put his helmet on and took the president by the hand. Then this odd couple advanced further into the clearing.

The alien launch was a plastic-looking craft about the size of a container lorry and the colour and shape of a fat cigar. It descended out of the night sky as smoothly and as quietly as a lift in a good hotel, and came to rest at a hover three feet above the rain-dampened sod. With a hiss of escaping gases, a section of the launch's fuselage began to peel away, revealing an opening about six feet in height and three feet wide.

"Set," Sir Frank said.

The leading edge of the peeling fuselage touched the ground, forming a ramp. A few moments later a figure appeared in the opening. It was dressed in a grey space-suit and wearing what looked like a matt-black crash helmet. A bulbous gauntlet covered the whole of its right forearm. The alien looked around then started down the ramp at a slow pace, walking with the rolling gait of a sailor who had yet to recover his land-legs.

When it reached the bottom of the ramp the little alien took a sharp right and took up a position in front of one end of the launch. At that same moment a second figure appeared in the opening. It came down the ramp and made for the other end of the launch. Four more aliens appeared in quick succession until there were six space-suited figures lined up in front of the launch, flanking the ramp.

The next alien to appear in the opening was dressed in a brilliant silver suit topped with an outsize helmet that shifted in colour from blue through green to gold as it descended the ramp.

"That's our target," Sir Frank said. "On my mark, everyone."

Margaret called out softly, "Now, Mr President."

The president started at the sound of her voice. Then he collected himself, squared his shoulders and raised his free hand and waved to the alien envoy. The silver-suited figure returned the gesture then started forward.

"Mark," Sir Frank said.

With a blinding flash of light and the scream of over-taxed engines, something shot up from behind the trees a couple of hundred yards off to the right. The engine note shifted from a whine to a roar, the front of the intruder dipped; and an alien spaceship of a 30-, if not 40-, year-old design started towards the clearing.

The bear-like Major Lippenbakker leapt into action, tackled his president from behind and forcing him to the ground.

Sir Frank Cooper put himself between Margaret and the intruder. Margaret stepped around him. Though she had closed her eyes as soon as Sir Frank had spoken in anticipation of the flash, the flash had all but succeeded in wiping out her night vision. She could just make out the figure of the alien envoy standing in the middle of the clearing with its arm thrown up across its faceplate. She could also see the small, dark shapes of the envoy's escort converging on their confused leader from both sides.

Ned Sparks was a lot closer. Leaving the president to the rough and tumble care of Major Lippenbakker, he sprinted forward and crashed into the alien envoy, sending it reeling backwards – into the arms of its escort. The intruder swept across the clearing at treetop height. A ruby-red beam of light shot out from its belly and struck the spot where only a moment before the alien envoy had been standing. The beam found Ned Sparks instead. His little body went rigid. Then it started to lift up off the ground, slowly at first but then with increasing speed, travelling along the path of the beam. When Ned reached the underside of the intruder, the beam snapped off and the intruder accelerated away. Within moments, it had disappeared back into the night.

The whole operation took less than 15 seconds from start to finish.

The alien envoy's wildly agitated escort bundled their leader back up the ramp and into the launch. Major Lippenbakker rolled off his president's back and tried to help him back to his feet, while at the same time attempting to drag him towards the 'safety' of the tree line. A pair of US Air Force MPs materialized from somewhere and came forward to help him.

Margaret surveyed the chaos around her for a few seconds then signalled to Sir Frank Cooper to join her and turned and calmly walked back to her car.

## 12 May 1979

For the next two days nothing but silence was heard from the aliens. The world lived those two days in limbo – though precious few knew it. No one really knew how the alien would answer the events of the night of 10th May.

Carol flew back to Australia. Mark and I played golf.



My game was all over the place. For the first time ever Mark beat me easily. He bought a sports car to celebrate. I drowned my sorrows in London Dry Gin. Margaret meanwhile got back to the business of government: tackling the mess Labour had made of the economy.

The news that the aliens had re-established contact with the Americans came on the Friday afternoon. Major Lippenbakker arrived at Number 10 soon after with a translation of the alien communiqué. Margaret met him in the Blue Room, with Ian Gow, Francis Pym and the First Sea Lord in attendance.

As soon as the greetings and introductions were dispensed with, Margaret said, "Well, major, is it good news or bad?"

Lippenbakker made a face. "It's... unexpected news, Madam Premier."

"Explain," Margaret said, in no mood for circumsppection.

"The Dagutusi accused the Luteel of attempting to kidnap their envoy," Lippenbakker said.

"As we hoped," Margaret said. "And naturally the Luteel denied everything." She wrote the word, 'WAR', on the notepad in front of her and underlined it twice.

"That's the unexpected thing, ma'am," Lippenbakker said. "According to the Dagutusi communiqué, the Luteel have accepted full responsibility."

This last statement was greeted with gasps of astonishment around the table.

"The Luteel have accepted full responsibility," Lippenbakker said, "but they're blaming a dissident faction in their military seeking to re-ignite the conflict."

"You're not serious," Ian Gow said.

"That's what the communiqué said," Lippenbakker maintained. "The language is unambiguous. The Luteel have already executed those 'responsible'."

Margaret was lost in thought. "A purge," she said at length. "The Luteel regime has used this as an excuse for a purge of its own domestic opposition." She marvelled at the ruthless opportunism of it all. "What clever, evil little monsters."

"But how have the Dagutusi reacted?" she said. "That is the question."

"Their communiqué is full of praise for the speed and efficiency with which the Luteel have dealt with the dissidents, ma'am," Lippenbakker responded. "It also expresses the hope that this marks a new era of greater peace and understanding between the two powers." He shook his head in disbelief. "It's... it's unexpected, ma'am."

"It certainly is," Margaret said. She turned back to her notepad and put a cross through the word, "WAR". Then she smiled. And then she started to laugh.

"You won, my love," I said. "I knew you would." I knew no such thing, but my praise was no less sincere for that. I kissed her.

"It was your belief in me that sustained me, Denis," Margaret said. "As always." I kissed her again then let go of her and went to the bar.

"Do you... do you really think they don't suspect anything?" I asked, still a little afraid to believe that we were truly in the clear.

Margaret considered the question while she watched me fix our drinks. "I think the Dagutusi like the truth they have now too much to abandon it to go in search of another," she said. "After all, they came in search of a hero and we gave them one."

"But their 'hero' is still missing, my love, surely?" I said. "How do they account for that?" I brought the drinks over to her.

"Clearly the Luteel dissidents vaporized him as soon as they realized that he wasn't the envoy," she said, somewhat disingenuously. "All neat and tidy; everybody's satisfied – except for those dead generals."

I handed Margaret her drink and she took a sip. "Oh, that's good," she said. We started towards the stairs and bed. "The Dagutusi are having a sort of memorial service for it – their pilot," Margaret said, as she mounted the first step. "They've asked us if we would like to send a representative."

"My God," I said, my mind reeling at the thought of a journey to another world half a galaxy away.

"I thought Ted Heath would be perfect," Margaret went on. "I've often contemplated sending him on a long trip."

I laughed. "Of course, the real man for the job would be little Ned Sparks," I said. "Who knows these alien types better?" It was Margaret's turn to laugh. "How is our Mr Sparks doing?" I asked her.

"A few pulled muscles and some bruises from his ride along the extractor beam, but otherwise he's fine," Margaret said. "Just sorry to have lost such a long engagement."

"The extractor beam. Our own personal galactic super-weapon," I marvelled. "It was damned lucky we had it."

"Lucky for Ned Sparks," Margaret replied. "It saved the men piloting the Roswell ship from having to vaporize him."

I missed my step on the stair and gaped at her. She continued climbing. What a woman. I hurried to catch up with her.

#### 14 November 1990

Such strength. Such single-minded determination. Margaret has always been prepared to do whatever it takes to win, to make whatever sacrifice she thinks necessary for victory. She proved that at the dawn of her premiership. And she'll prove it again now.

In short, Heseltine, Howe and that whole feckless crowd don't stand a chance.

**Jamie Barras** has had a number of stories published, mostly under pseudonyms, in small-press magazines including *Plot*, *The Third Alternative* and *Xenos*, but the above is his first contribution to *Interzone*. "In 'real life'," he tells us, "I'm a physical chemist, a post-doc, working at King's in London, where I spend my days playing with drugs and explosives – I'm told that this explains a lot."



# The Lady Macbeth Blues

*Stephen Dedman*

Bianca watched as Crystal dissected a rat, carefully wielding the scalpel so as not to nick the intestines; the reek of preserved dead animal was nauseating enough that four girls and two boys had already bailed out. It was the second week of semester, and not too late for the squeamish to transfer to another class. Bianca had decided to tough it out, despite having little love or talent for science. Biotech was one of the few growth industries this side of the Mississippi, and with social security non-existent in 14 states, the companies could afford to pick and choose. She stared as Crystal pinned the hide down to the ancient wax tray; when she dissected something, it actually looked the way it did in the textbook, as though it were nouvelle cuisine rather than a splatter-movie shot. Crystal looked up as though she'd heard her thinking, flashed a quick grin, and then froze. Bianca turned her head to see Mrs Hickey, her economics teacher, standing in the doorway. She looked so stricken that Bianca wondered who had died. Mrs Fish also turned to face the door.

"The Levin Bill has passed through the Senate," said Mrs Hickey quietly. "It's just come over the net. Unless the President vetoes it, it'll become law by next January."

Bianca turned to Crystal, who had paled to a sickly yellow-grey. Mrs Fish nodded, then turned to the class. "I'll be back in a few minutes," she said, then walked – a little unsteadily – out of the room. Even after the two teachers had disappeared from sight, the room remained uncannily quiet until someone cheered. Crystal flinched.

"Come on, let's party!" said the boy who'd cheered. "Hunt's not going to veto it, and you know what that means? More jobs for all of us!"

"It means," said Crystal coldly, "that we're going to lose some of our best teachers just because they're female and married." She knew there wasn't much chance that the President would act; the Levin Bill was too popular with the Promise Keepers and other traditional-values groups, employers tired of paying for maternity leave and childcare, and many blue-collar unions. Hunt hadn't even protested when South Carolina passed laws preventing couples with children under 16 (including first-trimester unborns) becoming divorced. Tough times, he'd muttered, required tough measures.

The boy hesitated, then shook his head. "Nah. The bill only prohibits government departments hiring married

women, not –”

“That includes *re-hiring*,” said Crystal. “And most teachers are on one- or two-year contracts, as are a lot of other workers. And it’s not just government departments; it includes any company with more than ten full-time employees, or any employer who has or wants a government contract.”

“Yeah, well,” the boy blustered, his face reddening to match his hair, “that’s good too. Spreads the work around more. I’m not going to miss Hickey, or the Fish, and it’s not my fault your father cut and run. You have to look at the big picture.”

Bianca reached out and grabbed her friend’s wrist, scared that she was going to throw the scalpel. “He’s a stupid, ignorant pig,” she said, softly.

“Sure,” said the girl sitting behind her, “but now he’s an employable stupid ignorant pig.”

Crystal shrugged and smiled – a smile that was as technically perfect as the dissected rat on the tray, and just as dead. “What about your mother?” Bianca asked.

“Casual,” Crystal replied quietly. “They can fire her at any time, they always could, but there was always the prospect of her getting another job. I guess we’ll have to move to some state that still has welfare.”

“It’s only an emergency measure,” said Bianca. “If unemployment drops back below 15 percent –”

“Which it never will,” said Crystal. “How many jobs are there left that can’t be done more cheaply and more efficiently by machines – or by one person and a few machines instead of five, ten, a dozen human workers? Not many, and next year there’ll be even fewer, at lower wages, and people will fight even harder to get them. Before you know it, men’ll be shooting each other for the right to clean the sewers, and the government will say it’s what we need to do to compete with the Asian economies, when what we really need to do is change the way we think.”

No one else in the room spoke, and Crystal realized that she’d raised her voice until it was audible throughout the room, and probably the corridor outside.

“You’ll be okay,” Bianca reassured her. “You won’t have any trouble getting into college, and the supernationals will always need scientists...”

“Sure,” said Crystal sourly. “What the hell, I never expected to get married anyway.”

Getting out of her antique wedding dress wasn’t as difficult as getting in, but it was still a job for at least two people, and Bianca was glad that Crystal was still around; she wasn’t ready to face Simon yet, and had asked him to wait in another room while she changed. “I think I’ve just discovered how medieval knights must have felt. Thank Christ they don’t expect me to wear it on the plane.”

Crystal, who was none too comfortable in her bridesmaid’s dress, laughed. “At least you’ll never have to wear it again.”

“No, but I’m already feeling sorry for my daughters. Ahhh!” She took a deep breath as Crystal unlaced her corset. “What’s the point of making a dress that only gets worn once, anyway? Do you think we could give it

to a museum?”

“Not while your in-laws are alive. What else did they give you, apart from the honeymoon?”

“Barrington House.”

Crystal’s face fell. “Oh, Gods. Do they expect you to live in it?”

“You’ve seen it?”

“Simon took me there, once. The place is a museum, and they won’t let you change any of it. Sleeping in a slave-owner’s bed is one thing – but they won’t even let you have a cat, for fear it might scratch the furniture, and honey, trying to cook in an antebellum kitchen... You can’t persuade Simon to ask for a transfer?”

Bianca shook her head as she struggled to remove her panty-girdle. Simon had studied and schemed too long to be given his position in R&D, and wasn’t about to give it up. “It’d be like begging to be disinherited. Besides, he couldn’t take you.”

“Yeah, well...”

“And I’d miss you, too.” She looked at the clothes draped over the bed. “You know, it’s hard to believe anyone except Jack the Ripper ever hated women enough to design shit like that. It wouldn’t do any good, Crys. The family, the company – they own all of us.”

“They don’t own me.”

“They own your work, and what’re they doing with it?”

Crystal looked at the crossed Civil War (*War Between the States*, she corrected herself automatically) cavalry sabres on the bedroom wall, and grimaced. “Touché. Did they give you anything else?” she asked, hoping to change the subject.

“A GeneSafe. It’s being put in tomorrow.”

A second hit; Crystal bit her lip. The GeneSafe was Sanderson MedTech’s profitable spinoff from the money-losing nanotech-based AIDS cure she’d helped develop. It was rapidly becoming a traditional wedding gift or 16th birthday present among the few wealthy enough to afford it; it was programmed with the genetic codes of the person in whom it was implanted, and usually one other – in most cases, the recipient’s husband. Nanomachines would then constantly scan the body (except for the digestive tract) for foreign genetic material, which would trigger a very visible immune response. Reprogramming was possible, but required minor surgery. It served as a smart contraceptive, and was as effective against sexually transmitted diseases as condoms but without the inconvenience to the male.

Crystal remembered the lecture she received after she’d designed her prototype machine. Society, her supervisor had told her, wanted an HIV vaccine, not an AIDS cure; transmission by blood transfusion and organ donation had been stopped so long ago that all those unfortunates were dead, and all new AIDS cases were regarded as self-inflicted. If they were to be cured, the diseased should at least be made to pay for the privilege. Crystal had looked into his face, and resisted the urge to spit in it. “By ‘society’,” she said, sweetly, “I presume you mean that elite group that you and I will never be permitted to join?”

Her super, Adams, had flushed visibly despite his dark skin. “That ‘elite’ has paid for your work, babe, and

has yet to get any visible return for that. You're lucky Old Man Sanderson believes in basic research, even if his spawn don't."

"That's because he's the only one who's lived long enough to see how it pays off," Crystal retorted. "How much has the company made out of the new lie-detectors? That wouldn't have happened if they hadn't sponsored Elzanowski's pheromone research, and —"

"I know, I know," Adams had replied wearily. It was an old argument for him, and he was usually defending the other side. "Your work will pay off eventually, and not just financially. Old Man Sanderson wants something that'll eat cancers, clean his lungs and livers and arteries, let him live the way he wants but for twice as long. That's what nanotech is going to give him, what you're going to give him... but that doesn't mean you're indispensable. There's a genius born every day somewhere, babe, but people with the money to pay for this sort of research — they're real rare."

Crystal snapped out of her reverie. "Anything else?" she asked Bianca weakly.

"Not from Simon's parents. The rest of the family gave us — what did they call it in *The Lord of the Rings*? Something like mammoths?"

"Mathoms," replied Crystal with a faint smile. "You'll probably get mammoths for your anniversary." Sanderson MedTech had managed to clone mammoths from frozen remains, but the embryos were still in the freezer pending a decision on who owned the copyright. The Siberian government needed the money and was expected to settle out of court eventually, but it seemed to enjoy making Americans wait.

"Albino ones, most likely," Bianca grumped. "Big hungry white elephants with perfect pedigrees. Jesus, Crys, almost everything they gave us is a registered antique, as though they expected me to try to sell some of them and run. The only new and remotely practical thing was a set of kitchen knives from Simon's grandparents. Good ones, sharp as scalpels, but isn't it supposed to be bad luck to give knives as a wedding present?"

"I don't know."

"Uh-huh." Bianca sniffed at her armpits. "Ugh. The House isn't air-conditioned either, is it?"

"Climate-controlled," Crystal assured her. "It was the only way to preserve the fabrics. If anything, it's too cold."

Bianca nodded, and headed for the en-suite bathroom. "How often did you go there?"

"Once was enough. He's not a bad man, honey."

"No, I guess not." She sighed. "I just wish he'd stand up to his parents occasionally."

"He will."

"Then why didn't he marry you?" Bianca turned the shower on full-blast, drowning out any possible reply Crystal might have made. Three minutes later, she stepped out of the tub, her eyebrows raised. Crystal shook her head. "They own him," said Bianca. "They own you. They own most of the fucking state, and they went to school with the people who own the other states and a few other countries. And now they own me. Did you see the pre-nup I had to sign?" She dried her face, and sighed. "Oh, fuck it, they say slavery's better than starving."

"They won't live forever."

"Won't they? I thought that's what you were working on?"

Crystal winced again. "If it works, it'll extend their life expectancy, but it won't do more than double it. The brain can't last any longer than that — 160, 180, 200 years tops."

"Their brains are already 200 years old," said Bianca sourly. "They think it's still 1850-something, and Abraham Lincoln's just an impertinent nobody with no future." She wiped the mist off the mirror, and stared at her face. "God, I look like shit."

"You look gorgeous."

"Thanks. You're beautiful. Crys..." She wrapped the towel around herself, and drew a deep breath. "You're right; Simon's not a bad man, I wouldn't have married him if he were, and you wouldn't have... but I don't want to see his parents turn him into one. Will you help me?"

"Any way I can."

"Thanks." She finished drying herself, dressed for the flight, and freshened up her make-up. "Okay, let's go."

Simon and his best man were sitting in the den watching one of the news channels. A PR flack was defending the use of Sanderson MedTech's new lie-detectors in screening job applicants. "These machines are 99% reliable," he blustered, while a split-screen shot showed the detector's needle unquavering. "They use nanotech to detect minute quantities of certain pheromones which are only emitted when somebody lies. We have to check our workers out thoroughly; even minor acts of negligence or sabotage can cost the —" Simon reached for the remote and muted the 3V as he heard the women walked in. "Ready?" Bianca, unable to speak, merely nodded.

Simon stood, and looked at both of them. "You're beautiful," he said, smiling broadly. "Rick, can you take Crystal home?"

Bianca zipped her dress closed and tried to smile. "I'm sorry," said Rick.

"Hey," she said, trying a little harder, "if condoms never failed, I probably wouldn't exist."

His mouth quirked slightly. "You have an implant, don't you?"

Bianca nodded. "A GeneSafe."

"You sound worried. Is there a problem?"

"I hope not," she said, sitting back on the bed. "It's just that... if it's been triggered, it's fairly obvious."

"How obvious?"

She sighed softly as she searched for her shoes. Rick, one of Sanderson MedTech's battalion of lawyers, seemed to take care to learn only what he needed to know at the time. "Iridescent blue patches inside the eyelids, in the lymph nodes, and any places my skin's thin enough for veins to be visible. If there was enough of your semen to activate the nanos, it'll start showing in an hour or two."

Rick sat up slowly. "How long does it last?"

"Two or three days."

"And when's Simon due back?"

"Tuesday, but Simon isn't the problem. I told him about us months ago." Rick blinked. "It's his parents."



"You told him?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

"Why not? I don't like lying. I was fairly sure he wouldn't mind, and he doesn't. He married me mostly to get his parents off his back, and maybe keep the Sanderson empire running for another generation, though he hasn't shown much sign of that. I thought you knew that?"

Rick rubbed his face, and climbed out of the bed. "No. I don't get to talk to him as much as I used to. Does he have someone else?"

"Yes," she said neutrally.

"Who?"

"If he hasn't told you, I'd rather not," she replied. She finished dressing, and leaned over to kiss him. "Look, it'll be okay. If anything does happen, I'll let the computer screen my calls."

"I don't know," said Rick. "The Old Man has a lot of spies... Does he know about Simon and...?"

"I'm sure he does – it's been going on for years – but they don't know about us."

"What do you think they'll do if they find out?"

She looked at Rick sadly. Nothing to you, she thought. Nothing to Simon, either. Something to me, maybe something to Crystal... but probably not, she's too useful to them. "They won't find out," she said, kissed him goodbye, and hurried home.

Bianca stared at the blue spot on her wrist, then plunged her hands back into the soapy water to hide it. She stood there for nearly a minute before looking at her wrist again, in the faint hope that it was something she'd imagined.

It wasn't. It was still small and pale, and she might not have noticed it if she hadn't been looking for it, but she was sure that the spot would fluoresce faintly if she examined it under black light. It wasn't as though she hadn't been expecting it. She swore softly, and plunged her hands back into the dishwasher, wishing again her in-laws had given her something practical – or at least less malicious – as a wedding present. An autochef, maybe, or even a dishwasher... but the ancient kitchen would have earned an approving nod from an Amish woman. Most of the dishes she was washing were genuine breakable antiques, and while some of the knives had monatomic edges, they were otherwise ordinary knives.

She left the dishes in the sink, wiped her hands on her apron, and walked into the bathroom to stare at her face in the mirror. Nothing yet. The silence of the dark, empty house was beginning to get on her nerves, so she reached for the 3V remote. The Chief Justice was defending the Supreme Court's decision that unmarried women could not claim damages for sexual harassment unless the alleged harasser was married. "We can't criminalize courtship behaviour," he sound-bit. A news-reader, aided by gory computer graphics, told the story of a man who'd turned up for a job interview armed with an Uzi and fired at those ahead of him in the queue. Eleven had died, three of them because they'd hesitated too long before running. Bianca shook her head and

channel-hopped. Baseball, cartoons, basketball, soaps, low-g gymnastics from Mars, het softcore, het hardcore... she watched with dull amusement as the couple on the screen lit up cigarettes. Tobacco advertising had been banned everywhere but the adults-only channels; she was surprised that the cigarette companies still bothered with the domestic market. More basketball, music videos, gaymale softcore, the *Star Trek* channel, more soaps. She switched back to the news channel, and walked back to the kitchen, rubbing at the spot on her wrist. Jesus, she thought, it's not as though that pre-nup gives them the right to both my kidneys or anything. I can leave if I want...

And go where? she asked herself. Unemployment was still rising, Levin Act or no Levin Act, and the price of a divorce had been increased to more than most people made in a year. Even if she'd been single, her chances of finding a job at 27 were minimal. Social Security had been scrapped in every state except Alaska, Canada was deporting illegal immigrants by the truckload, her parents were living in a retirement home thanks to her income, and that only left the retraining camps. Shivering, she plunged her hands back into the water, half-wishing that Simon had gotten her pregnant. It might have mollified his parents; his mother was constantly buying gifts for the prospective grandchild, and she might even have done something to make her life less miserable if she became the mother of the Sanderson heir, though she doubted that they'd leave her in charge of her child for very long. But Simon was content to wait for his parents to die, as long as he had Crystal, and she knew she couldn't rely on Rick... and Crystal was apparently still determined to make his parents as near-immortal as possible. Bianca clenched her fists in the water, cutting her fingers on the monatomic edge of a kitchen knife. She withdrew her right hand, watching with little more than mild intellectual curiosity as blood dripped from the incredibly fine cut into the water. She stood there for several seconds, then wrapped a tea-towel around her wounded hand and walked to the bathroom.

The phone rang. She ignored it, letting the computer answer. "Bianca, dear," said her mother-in-law's sour syrupy voice, as Bianca fumbled in the cabinet for the first-aid kit. "I need to come around some time before Saturday. The insurance company needs to check on the paintings, to make sure they're being maintained according to their dreary little agreement. I don't know precisely when, but I'll try to call you beforehand. Goodbye."

Bianca stood in the bathroom, staring into the mirror and trying to stop herself shaking. Simon's family found an excuse to visit and examine some part of the antique collection nearly every time Simon was out of town for more than a few days – as though they suspected her of stealing items or replacing them with forgeries. She attempted to bandage her fingers with her left hand, but after less than a minute, she dropped the kit in anger and stalked back into the kitchen and grabbed one of the knives. I'll show you bad luck, she thought, as she walked back into the sitting room and looked around at the paintings, wondering which one to start on.

She looked down at her bleeding hand. The mark on

her wrist was now bright blue. She glanced at her left wrist; the mark there was smaller, but just as distinct – maybe even a little brighter. With a shriek, she stabbed at it with the knife, slicing across the vein and into the tendon. The mark remained. She drew a deep breath, and began systematically cutting along the vein. The monatomic blade sliced through the flesh easily, with almost no pain. She looked at the incision with faint approval, and then grabbed the bloody knife with her left hand and attempted to make an identical incision on her right wrist. A few seconds later, she dropped the knife at her feet, and staggered towards the phone.

“Crystal? It’s Bianca. Look, I’ve... I need your help.”

The doctor looked down at the woman on the stretcher. “What happened?” she asked.

Crystal and the paramedic looked at each other. “We’re not sure,” said Crystal cautiously. “She was unconscious when I arrived. The cut to the fingers might have been accidental – she was washing dishes by hand, including some sharp knives – but the injuries to the wrists look self-inflicted.”

“You found her first?”

“Yes. She called me; her husband’s in New York. I stitched her up and bandaged her as best I could with a first-aid kit.”

“You’re a medic?”

“Geneticist, but I’ve had medical training.”

The doctor nodded, and reached for Bianca’s throat, taking her pulse, then pulled down her eyelids to look at her eyes. “This blue...”

“She has a GeneSafe,” said Crystal.

“I thought so. Do you know what’s triggered it?”

“It must have been the transfusion,” replied Crystal. “She’d lost a lot of blood by the time I arrived; I had the paramedics give her a transfusion as soon as possible. Sometimes the GeneSafe reacts to the leucocytes, but the reaction is harmless.” The doctor blinked. “I work for Sanderson MedTech. I wasn’t on the team that designed this device, and I don’t have one myself, but I know the principle.”

The doctor nodded. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, I think you’ve saved this woman’s life. Lucky you knew what to do.”

“Yes,” said Crystal softly. “Yes, it was.”

Bianca lay in the bed with her eyes closed, feigning unconsciousness. The silence, the smells of flowers and antiseptics, and the ache of the drip into her arm, was enough to tell her she was in a soundproofed private hospital room; she didn’t need to see it. “Interfering nigger dyke bitch,” muttered her mother-in-law. “We ought to send her to Malaysia, that’d teach her how easy she’s got it here.”

“We can’t,” replied her husband, whispering the way most people do around a sleeper or a corpse. “Adams has convinced the Old Man that she’s going to make him immortal.”

“Good a reason as any; the sooner he’s dead, the sooner we inherit. Christ, Bobby, you could at least stand up to him behind his back, if you can’t do it to his face.”

“The longer he lives, the more we inherit,” Bobby Sanderson said. “He has a real gift for making money; I know, part of it’s reputation, but not all of it. When he dies – if he dies, come to that – Sanderson MedTech’s stock is going to take a dive. We’ll lose millions, maybe billions. Besides, if Adams is right, what do you think immortality is worth?” His wife stared at him blankly. “We can charge whatever we like for it – the government can’t stop us – but it’s worth a lot more than money. This is the fucking power of life and death! And while we hold the patent, we decide who lives and dies! Imagine what that’ll mean to those assholes in Washington – or overseas. What do you think al-Sauds and the Kuwaiti sheikhs would give us for it? Or any other emperor, king, or President-for-Life? Now what do you think of the nigger dyke bitch?”

Bianca could almost hear her mother-in-law smiling. “I think we can put up with her for a little longer, in that case,” she muttered. “But what happens if she decides to leave the company, and take her secrets with her?”

“Why should she? Adams swears she works harder than anybody else in the lab, on the same salary she started on; your hairdresser makes more than she does. And she hardly even goes home, except to feed her cats; she has a bed set up in her lab instead.”

“What if she wants to live forever too? Are you going to give her that?”

“It’s not my decision, but if she’s still useful to us, the Old Man might... and why not?”

“What if another company offers her a better deal?”

“Why would they? How would they know what she’s done? We’re not telling anybody. Look, we’ll find a way to keep her here – why are you so worried, anyway?”

“Simon spends too much time in that lab.”

Sanderson laughed. “What’s wrong with that? The more he knows about R&D, the better.”

“What if he’s sleeping with her?”

“*Droit de seigneur*,” replied Sanderson drily. “Or is it *de rigueur*? Anyway, it’s as old as – well, I’m not a historian, but Jesus, all work and no play... or are you scared she’s going to bring a pup along to one of your D.A.R. meetings? They both have more sense than that.” He always tried to be out of town whenever his wife and her Daughters of the American Revolution cronies gathered; marrying an aristocrat hadn’t been his idea. The Old Man had arranged the wedding to win favour with her father, then the state’s junior senator and heir to a dwindling but still prestigious tobacco empire. Bobby Sanderson sometimes wondered why she’d co-operated; it was obvious that neither of them had married for love.

“What about you?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“How much have you been exercising your *droit de seigneur*?”

“Jesus, you’ve got a suspicious mind lately! None since we were married,” he lied. “Before that, I didn’t keep count.” He glanced at his Rolex rather than meet her eyes. “Where the hell is Simon? He should’ve been here half an hour ago. I’m going out for a smoke; call me when he comes in, or when she wakes up, whichever comes first.”

Adams looked nervously around the boardroom, suddenly conscious that his best suit probably cost less than most of the neckties he could see, and cleared his throat. "I'm not sure what rumours you've heard, but we do not have the secret of immortality, nor have we discovered the fountain of youth. What we have is a nanotechnology-based device similar to the GeneSafe, but far more sophisticated. It prevents and reverses the growth of cancers, removes blockages from arteries, fat from around the heart, tar and other crap from the lungs, and so on. It may even be able to prevent or at least delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease, though we haven't done enough testing on human subjects to be sure." He decided not to mention that most of their test subjects had been chimps, pigs and hamsters; few of the directors knew enough biology to understand the ways in which these animals were similar to humans. "It won't repair all types of existing damage, users won't look any younger though they should feel healthier, and some of us may already have over-stressed our bodies beyond its power to heal, but barring accidents it should increase normal life expectancy by about a century." Silence suddenly fell over the room. Adams glanced at the Old Man, who was sitting at his left. "We haven't told marketing about this, of course, but in the meantime, we're calling it the Centurion."

"Thank you, Dr Adams," said the Old Man, as Adams sat down. "Of course, gentlemen, we can't just release a device like this onto the market ad hoc. The country is already paying too much in benefits to unproductive retirees; they just have too many votes." There were a few loyal chuckles from around the great oaken table. "What would happen to the economy if all of these people were to live for another hundred years? We're paying too much damn tax already! No, this has to be kept secret. It will, of course, be available to all of you gentlemen, and your families, for the bargain-basement cost of a quarter million per, plus a check-up every five years at half the going rate. Note that this price will not be offered to anybody else; Dr Adams and I have worked out a scale based on five percent of the buyer's net worth, with a minimum price of half a million, and a top of 20 million. Obviously there are many potential clients who could pay much more, but there are more important considerations than short-term profit. Despite Dr Adams's understandable caution, this might be immortality; who knows how medtech might improve over the next century? There are many people who could afford a Centurion, at any price we might set, that we may not want around for that long, overpaid entertainers and similar parasites, as well as some heads of state."

He smiled frostily. "It's imperative that we use it carefully, selectively. I suggest we start with a maximum of one thousand, to be implanted over the next four years, and then reduce production to fewer than a hundred a year. It would, for example, be of no advantage to us to sell one to the President when he has only three years left to serve. But senators, congressmen, judges, other politicians and administrators who can continue to serve well into the next century..." he showed his transplanted teeth in a grin, "whose interests and concerns

are parallel to ours, and whose gratitude can be depended upon, thanks at least in part to the need for regular check-ups..." He paused again, watching smiles break out across the room as the directors began thinking. "Thanks to Dr Adams's team, we need no longer be tied to short-term goals, we can make plans for the next century in the hope of seeing them come to fruition. We can be sure of stable government, not the current chaos. We can choose the next century's leaders now."

He took a deep breath. "For too long, cheap medical care has enabled less productive members of our society to survive into their second century, while the world's elite, the decision-makers, have been overworking and overstressing ourselves into early graves, wasting all that experience and learning. History has been rewritten by those too young to remember it, dishonouring great men and fine traditions..." He coughed; his face was turning red, and Adams watched him with genuine alarm, wondering if he was going to have a heart attack before they'd had a chance to implant his Centurion. The Old Man grabbed a glass of water, sipped it slowly, and continued more quietly. "Of course, there's another, more immediate advantage. You'll now be working for yourselves, getting what you deserve, instead of it going to your widows or your ungrateful heirs. Now –" He tried to laugh, but it became another coughing fit. "Sorry. Now, Dr Adams and I have prepared a list of potential clients, which I'll now hand around for everybody's approval – but for God's sake, remember that we have to keep this as quiet as possible! I know the rumours are already circulating; lie, if you have to. We can implant up to two of these a day without breaching security. The sooner I have your cheque, the sooner you get onto Dr Adams's list. Any questions?"

Bianca spent two weeks in the hospital before she was discharged, and had been home for five days when Crystal visited. "Sorry I couldn't get here sooner," said her friend. "We've been completely snowed under at the lab..."

"I know," Bianca replied levelly, as Crystal collapsed into a rocking chair that had once belonged to Jefferson Davis. "Simon told me. Do you want a drink?"

"Coffee?"

"Fine." She walked into the antiquated kitchen. "Simon's told me about the... what are they calling it? The Centurion? Was that your project?"

"Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa."

"What?"

"Most of it, yes. Why?"

"He told me they add about a hundred years to your life expectancy. Is that true?"

"In some cases. They haven't given you one, have they?"

"No," replied Bianca dully. "Simon's father said I'm too young to need one, and his mother told him they wouldn't waste it on someone who'd already tried to kill herself. Maybe after a few years." She poured boiling water over the coffee bags, and waited for them to brew. "What about you?"

"Too young, like you, and I can't afford one. Anyone under 50 either pays ten million plus or waits in line. You wouldn't believe the people who've visited the lab

this week." She chuckled.

"No, probably not," said Bianca. She placed the coffee mugs on a silver tray, removed a small revolver from a drawer and slipped it into her apron pocket, then headed back towards the sitting room.

"Thanks," said Crystal, as she took her mug. "So, how're you feeling?"

Bianca sat opposite her, put the tray down on a small table, and drew the pistol. Crystal stared at it, her eyes wide. "You know," said Bianca sourly, "before I went to hospital, none of the guns in this place were loaded? I made sure. I knew they hadn't been plugged or anything, the Old Man wouldn't let anyone do that to a firearm, but when I come back, surprise! Loaded firearms everywhere. They didn't bother with the old black-powder weapons, but there's still enough for a modest massacre. I guess someone's trying to send me some sort of message." She looked at the pistol sadly, then pointed it at Crystal's face. "You stupid fuck, do you know what you've done?"

"Put the gun down."

"The hell I will! You sold out! You sold out to them! Thanks to you, those monsters are going to live for centuries like fat fireproof leeches, until they own or control everything and no one else can remember a world without them!"

Crystal shook her head, and wondered if she could tip the chair backwards far enough to get out of the line of fire. Probably not. "I thought you knew me better than that. Jesus, Senator Levin's getting his Centurion next week; do you think I want him to live for another hundred years? Put the gun down, and I'll explain." Bianca didn't move. "Okay. To answer your question, yes, I know exactly what I've done – much better than anyone else does. Oh, the Centurions do what Adams has been telling people they do – but more. You know those new lie-detectors the company is making?"

Bianca blinked, then grimaced. "Yes. They're using them to screen job-applicants and anyone who needs legal aid." "Yeah, I know. Do you know how they work?"

"They detect some pheromone that people only emit when they're lying, right?"

"Right. So does the Centurion; it's an extra feature I didn't bother telling anyone about. When the nanos detect this pheromone, they head for the brain. Enough nanos in the brain, and they cause aneurysms. You also get the same blue patches inside the eyelids and in the lymph nodes that you have when a GeneSafe is activated. If you ignore this warning and keep lying, the aneurysms will rupture, causing massive haemorrhagic strokes, which should be fatal in 70-90% of cases." Bianca stared at her, horrified. "Of course, you have to lie a lot to cause this degree of build-up; consistently, and over quite a long period. I'm not expecting the first deaths for more than a year, and most of the Old Man's pet politicians should survive until the primaries. Longer, maybe, if they notice the warning signs, assume they're sick, and pull out of the race. It should increase life expectancy at least slightly for some users, though not too many, and if there's anyone on the list who's rich and honest, anyone who wouldn't secretly sell poison baby food if there was a buck in it, they

might even live for the full two hundred years."

The pistol wavered slightly. "Fortunately," Crystal continued, "most of the people buying Centurions are already old enough that it'll take a long time for anyone to guess that the device may be causing the strokes, even if they can cross-reference the deaths with a list of clients – Adams is bright enough, but we can trust him not to stick his neck out or jump to any conclusions, and the Old Man probably won't live long enough to detect a pattern himself. Even if someone becomes suspicious, there's no known way – yet – to remove enough of the nanos to prevent this happening, so the only other safety measure possible is not to lie. Besides, the company will publicly deny that any such device exists... can't you just imagine the Board of Directors sitting in some Congressional hearing, swearing that their product is perfectly safe until they literally turn blue in the face? I wonder if any of them will have the grace to drop dead with their hands still on the Bible? Gives a new meaning to laying them in the aisles."

Bianca stared at her, her face dead white – then she carefully placed the pistol on the table so that it pointed away from both of them. "Is this true?"

"Get a lie detector and I'll say exactly the same thing," Crystal replied, more calmly than she felt. She waited for several seconds – it felt like hours – until Bianca nodded. "Okay. I'm sorry I doubted you, Crys."

"Forget it. I knew I'd fooled nearly everyone, but I didn't expect to fool you. Jesus, you had me scared." She began laughing, nervously at first, and then more heartily as Bianca joined in. Suddenly, Bianca stopped laughing, and her face turned pale again. "What about Simon?" she asked.

"Simon?"

"He's on the list for a Centurion – a fair way down the list, but he's a Sanderson, and he turns 40 next year. Are we going to tell him?"

"Oh Jesus," Crystal said. "Do you think he'd tell his parents if we did?"

"I think he would," whispered Bianca. "He lies to them about you, but this... I think he'd tell everyone." Crystal nodded, her expression bleak. "What do we do? Do we let him get a Centurion? Do we ask him to keep this a secret, too, even if it means lying? Do we wait until he puts us on the list for Centurions, too? What the hell do we do?"

"I don't know, honey," said Crystal. She looked around the dingy antique-littered room, and then shook her head. "I just don't know."

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**Stephen Dedman** wrote "A Single Shadow" (*Interzone*, 131), which has since been reprinted in the American magazine *Weird Tales*. His debut novel, *The Art of Arrow Cutting*, appeared from Tor Books in the USA in 1997. He lives near Perth, Western Australia, and is therefore almost a neighbour of our lead writer in this issue, Greg Egan – but apparently the two have never met.



# Turn-of-the-Century REAL LIFE

Don Webb

**B**ernard Dorset was three weeks past deadline when he heard the frog's beautiful voice.

"If you kiss me," she said, "I will return to my true form as a beautiful maiden and grant you my undying love."

He picked the frog up and put her in his pocket. He continued walking to his apartment. He wanted to check out the latest issue of *Gamer's World*. They were reviewing his latest computer game, *Red Ridin' in the Hood*. It would be a pretty grim review. He had finished the game four weeks past his deadline with the editor calling him every 24 hours filled with threats of legal pressure. He shouldn't have taken up game design, but it let him be his own boss. Which was pretty good – being self-employed – except you never met anyone at the office parties.

He went into his apartment and plopped down on his bed. A muffled voice came from his shirt pocket.

*Oh, that's right, he remembered. The frog.*

He took it from his pocket and put it next to his PC. The frog began to tell him that if he kissed her, she would turn into a beautiful...

...but the phone rang and it was Tom Calaban, his editor from GETA Games in Detroit. Tom was one of those rare individuals whose imaginative grasp was equal to his technical ability. Unfortunately both of these metaphoric lengths could be measured in angstroms. Tom had initially suggested that Bernard's next game be earthshakingly unique and bizarre. When it came to the actual writing of the game, however, Tom had wound up instructing Bernard to rewrite his semi-successful game of last year, *The Three Cyberpigs*, into a corporate version, *The Three Brokerpigs*. Such leaps of mediocrity had won him a permanent geostationary orbit in the stellar world of game design.

Tom did not like the proposed scene where the lawyer wolf appeared at Straw Co. with his briefs, yelling, "Let me in! Let me in! Let me in or I'll file an injunction!" He began suggesting different rhymes for the word "in" but seemed to be missing the point that

they had to be *legal* terms. Then the damn frog started talking again.

"What's that?" asked Tom.

"It's my talking frog," said Bernard.

"Well, turn it off and get to work, you're screwing up our schedule." With that Tom slammed down the phone.

Bernard said to the frog, "Can I get you some water or a fly or something?"

"Don't you understand?" said the frog in a silvery voice. "I am a beautiful princess changed into this state by foul sorcery. Your kiss will free me to my true form and in exchange I will give you my undying love."

"Look," said Bernard, "I'm three weeks past deadline. I don't have time for human relationships, but owning a talking frog is cool."

The frog said nothing. Its eyes may have registered shock, but it's hard to tell with a frog. Bernard began typing furiously, trying to incorporate Tom's lack-of-vision into a work that Bernard had already grown to hate.

Hours later the frog said, "I need water."

Bernard looked up from his work. "Yeah," he said, "it is about time for food."

He picked the frog up and put it in his pocket. He let the water sprinkle it while he prepared a couple of cups-o-soup. He sat the frog in front of the Styrofoam cup and dug into his own with relish.

"So," he said, "how long have you been a talking frog?"

"I'm not a frog. I am a princess transformed into this shape by the witch Ingeborg."

"Sounds like mental illness to me. Of course I can understand, there aren't many role models for talking frogs."

"Why do you think I'm mad?"

"Well for one thing, there aren't many princesses around in Austin, Texas. For another there aren't any witches."

"Shows what you know. The cup of soup is crappy, by the way. I am an heir to a principality which once was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. True, my family

lost the castle and so forth about the time of the Napoleonic Wars. But royalty is in the blood, not in the possession of the real estate.”

“So how did you come to live in Austin?”

“My folks, the late Prince and Princess, lived in Dallas, Texas. I grew up there, was a cheerleader at the local high school, and won a scholarship to UT. During my freshman year Mom and Dad died in an auto accident and I became the Princess. Look, if you’re not interested in kissing me, I’ll just go and find someone that is.”

And with that the talking frog leapt from Bernard’s card table and hopped toward the door. When she arrived there, Bernard walked over, scooped her up and returned her to her cup of soup.

“I’m not going to let a crazy frog into the world. You might get hurt, or killed, or exfoliated.”

“You’ve got no right to keep me.”

“A little while ago you were promising me your undying love if I kissed you – not that I go around kissing small hideous creatures – now you want to leave. Sounds like instability to me. It’s a mean world out there and no place for a crazed amphibian.”

Bernard finished his soup. He typed furiously till around nine o’clock, then he stared off into space.

The frog asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m at a plot point. The lawyer-wolf is trying to manage a hostile takeover of Brick-Co Inc. I need a dramatic way to describe his failure in game terms.”

“Had he succeeded in his other takeovers?” asked the frog.

“Yes,” said Bernard, “but the little pigs had escaped their CEO positions and fled to their brother’s firm.”

The frog and Bernard had an hour’s brainstorming session after which the frog fell asleep and Bernard typed furiously. He couldn’t tell which ideas were his and which the frog’s, but the image of the lawyer-wolf blowing legal documents out of his mouth against the brick walls of Brick-Co, and then being fined for littering, was the fun touch that ended the game. About one in the morning he e-mailed the whole thing to Calaban.

The frog snored daintily. Bernard wondered if he should have made a little bed for the frog, or at least put it in the bathtub where it could have its skin refreshed with water.

Calaban called at an ungodly eight o’clock the next morning. He hadn’t liked the game, but *his* boss thought it was brilliant, simply brilliant. GETA games was even going to break a long-standing tradition and actually pay Bernard on schedule.

Bernard shaved, showered, and went out for doughnuts. When he got back to his apartment, he couldn’t find the frog and had a panic attack.

Ten minutes of frenzied searching later, there she was – beneath the dripping tap in his bathroom sink. He offered her a doughnut.

“Thanks,” she said.

He told her the great news about GETA.

“You see, my idea has set you free, now give me a kiss and free me as well.”

“First off,” said Bernard, “I don’t count any money

until the check clears. Secondly, I’d have come up with the idea myself. Given time.”

“At least this is better than living in the storm drain. My skin is drying; please put me back in your sink.”

When the frog relaxed under the dripping tap, Bernard worked on his novel. After a while the frog hopped out of the sink, into his bedroom, and up next to his PC.

“What are you working on?”

“My novel, *The Surgeons*.”

“You are a novelist?”

“I want to be a novelist, I’ve done some novels for gaming companies – working on other people’s stuff – but I want to work on my own.”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s the story of a beautiful woman who lives with seven height-challenged plastic surgeons. They labour night and day to make her the most beautiful woman on earth, but a rival beauty queen poisons her.”

“Then what happens?”

“I don’t know. I want the surgeons to save her, but that doesn’t seem quite right. I think I’ll have them put her in cryonic suspension.”

“That won’t work. Or at least it’s not enough. You need a handsome prince to awaken her from her sleep.”

“Hmmmmp, I don’t know. That could work, but wouldn’t it be better for the surgeons to cure her?”

“The surgeons just work on improving someone else’s stuff – the true beloved must work to create his own.”

“Create?”

“The beloved must create his loved one out of love. Technicians can only improve or fill out existing patterns.”

“Hey, that’s what I’ve been thinking about! I’ve been looking for the words. That’s why I want to work on my own stuff. Thanks.”

“Can I have another doughnut?”

Many keystrokes later, as the afternoon sun tried to burn through Bernard’s mini-blinds, he asked the frog about her condition.

“Say, frog,” he said. “In my novel the rival beauty queen – the one who poisons the heroine – is more or less a witch, I would guess. Now in your personal mythology you say that you interacted with a witch. Can you tell me your story so that I can get a feel for the archetype?”

“If I tell you my story, will you introduce me to a nice man who’ll kiss me and set me free?”

“Maybe,” lied Bernard.

“OK,” said the frog. “In my sophomore year at UT the student paper, *The Daily Texan*, decided to do a story on the ‘most interesting’ men and women on campus. Well, on a campus as big as UT there were many candidates. Someone told the paper that I was a real live princess, and they came and made my picture wearing a tiara. I asked if they were going to run a story on me – they said it was between me and Ingeborg Robinson, a girl in another dorm who claimed to be a real live witch.”

“A wiccan?”

“No, not a goddess-worshipping positive figure – just somebody with ‘powers’ as best the reporter explained

it to me. Anyway, the next day this woman shows up in a black and red dress and a tall cone hat, knocking at my door. I let her in and she says something about she's worked long and hard to get her reputation going and all I did was get born. I didn't really have a response, after all it is considered wrong in this country to have ancestors of the dead European white male variety. Then she pulled something from the air – just reached up and grabbed and suddenly her right hand was full of tiny red coals and grey smouldering ash. Her left hand was full of black-green muddy silt. She threw the coals on me and said, 'Neither dream nor desire burns within you, my fire scalds you without.' And I hit the floor rolling trying to get the coals off. They seemed to cover my body. Each one burning with a piercing fire that was each-in-itself more painful than anything I'd ever known. I had no thoughts, I was just pain. Then she said, 'A lower ordering of life ends your ills, sleep there till you are awakened to desires and dreams.' Then she threw the mud on me. It felt so good! So cool and soothing! All I was was a feeling of liquid cool pleasure. Sometimes waking, sometimes sleeping, sometimes eating, sometimes laying eggs."

"Laying eggs?"

"Well, I am a female frog, you know. I don't know how I left the dorm room. It was many many years before I became aware of my status. I would be swimming along in Shoal Creek and I would see a jogger on the jogging path and that word 'jogger' would pop into my frog brain, jogging my frog thoughts. At first awareness came one word at a time, but one day I thought a whole thought. I thought, I don't like being a frog, I want to be a princess again. After that my awareness remained. I came to understand the witch's power. You see, I didn't want anything. I had no goals, no wants, I just sort of drifted along. There wasn't any real difference between me and a frog. No thoughts about who I was or wanted to be – I hadn't even picked a major. But once I knew what I wanted, my mind came back. For some months I thought just knowing was enough. If I possessed this secret, surely it would be transformative. But no, every night I went to sleep a frog, every morning I awoke a frog. So I decided to do something about it."

"What?"

"Well, firstly, I learned to talk. Now, I had to be very careful doing this – after all if some *child* heard me talking, he was apt to put me in his pocket and take me home. It took four years to learn to speak. Then I began looking for my prince."

Bernard glanced at the clock. Six-thirty. Some of the guys would be coming by to play *Acquire*. He wanted to write down some of the frog's story. There were all sorts of interesting ideas in it. He picked up the frog and put her in a shoe box. He could hear the frog cussing him, but he didn't want to lose the inspiration, and he *certainly* didn't want the guys to know about her. They would take her away or tell the papers or something. He closed the bedroom door.

He couldn't keep his mind on the game. His friends

didn't leave till nearly midnight. He watched the last of them, Pel Terry, drive off in his white Chevy pick-up. He waited for a full 15 minutes – being sure that none of them drove back for any reason before he even opened the bedroom door.

He had to prepare himself during this time as well. He wanted to tell her that he had to shut her up because she was so inspiring. He had never finished any of his novels because he lacked inspiration. Even for most of his games – he didn't get them finished without a brainstorming session. He'd call somebody, usually a game designer bud, and ask him to help him figure out what to do. What to write next. He was happiest when he had an idea. When he had an idea, he was sexy, hardworking, clean-shaven. The few girlfriends he had had, had been during those periods of inspiration – when he was a ball of energy. He had long periods of no inspiration at all. Oh, he could grind out semi-suitable material re-telling some old tale to barely fire the imagination of an electronic-game consumer. But the real came seldom.

When he had rehearsed his speech a zillion times, he went into his bedroom, pulled out the shoe box and took off the lid.

The frog was apparently dead.

Not moving.

Dry skin.

He had killed her with his greed.

He ran to the sink and turned the faucet onto the frog. The strong stream of water sort of dented her skin, but no sign of life appeared.

He went to the yellow pages. He was sure he had seen a listing for some emergency 24-hour animal clinic. His fingers were shaking so bad he couldn't turn the pages. He couldn't think of the word "veterinary." He couldn't think of anything. All he wanted was her back.

Finally reason possessed him. There wasn't some clinic that could bring back the dead. It was ended.

He took her body out of the sink and dried it off.

He would bury her in the shoe box. Like a pet. Well, what else could he do? The possibility had already suggested itself to him that it had all been a delusion. He was under a heck of a lot of stress. Deadlines can do amazing things to the mind – cut to some deep archetypal core whose manifestations in the day-to-day world the credulous would call magic.

He looked around for something to make the shoe box into a respectable coffin. He remembered some silk handkerchiefs a well-meaning but clueless aunt had given him for his 30th birthday. God, he couldn't believe that was five years ago. Where had his life gone? Still writing games, still waiting for inspiration, for the sweet song of the muse which he now guessed was sung only once to men like him.

He made the handkerchief into a little bed. *Mustn't put a pea in it*, he thought, *that would hurt a princess*. Then he picked up the frog's clammy body, and before laying it into the shoe box gave it a kiss.

Something stirred. Some electrical thrill passed

through his lips into the frog's body. He lay it upon his bed. Could it be?

The metamorphosis wasn't a movie special effect. There wasn't a sudden growing or bloating of the animal. It was as though Bernard's way of looking at the frog changed. Not unlike an optical illusion – is it two faces, or a vase? Suddenly it was a woman, and yet he knew that it had always been a woman – despite his ease in picking her up.

Her moist brown eyes were open and looking at him. That she was naked was neither a source of lust nor embarrassment. We all came into the world naked. She breathed. At first fitfully then calmly. Then she smiled.

With a shock, Bernard realized that he had never asked her her name. He knew that he was about to and when he heard it, it would be the most beautiful sound in the world.

(For Pico della Mirandola)

**Don Webb** is well known for his hundreds of stories, mostly short-shorts, which have appeared in a wider spread of magazines, worldwide, than the work of any other writer known to us. Latterly, he has also been writing mystery novels. His last pieces here were "Man of Steel Saves the World" (issue 131) and "The Jest of Yig" (issue 143). He lives in Texas.

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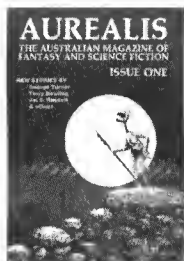
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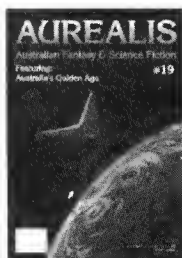


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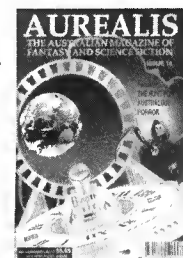
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## The Triumph of Squid

Paul J. McAuley

A little while ago, when the new generation of British sf writers were yet young, their unwritten novels burgeoning inside them like frogs in mud, and *Interzone* came but once each season and still had space for editorials, David Pringle and Colin Greenland put up a brief proposal. It didn't set an agenda or raise a clarion call for a new Movement, but did suggest, modestly, that there was room in sf for new fictions that would be "critical and investigative, facing up to the science and technology of the present and future... using the hard-edged language and imagery of technology for imaginative interpretations of reality." Stuff Pringle and Greenland called radical, hard sf.

A few authors whose apprenticeships began in the pages of *Interzone* decided that here was a phrase which defined the kind of stuff they were writing. They were (they agreed) the *rads*, members of a purely theoretical group which has no manifesto or secret handshake (although in a purely ironic spirit they did once think of getting a few T-shirts made), nor even a membership list (Greg Egan, if he were ever to join anything, would definitely belong, as would Gwyneth Jones, Michael Swanwick and Paul Di Filippo – biopunk is very definitely rad). A group whose definition is as vague as that of sf itself, whose existence is mostly a private joke. Gardner Dozois, ever sensitive to the zeitgeist, has suggested that radical hard sf (the comma has long been dropped) is revamped, updated, widescreen space opera, which it is, but it is not just space opera. It's

hard-edged fiction that is rooted in the core traditions of sf but which also surfs the wave of the present, crammed with bleeding-edge science and eyeball kicks, and populated by characters you can walk around.

All of which is preamble to Stephen Baxter's latest novel, *Time: Manifold 1* (Voyager, £17.99), the first of a thematic trilogy, and for the most part the very model of a radical hard sf novel. In every page, you sense Baxter's thorough and argumentative engagement with the history of the genre as, by plausible extrapolations of physics, biology and

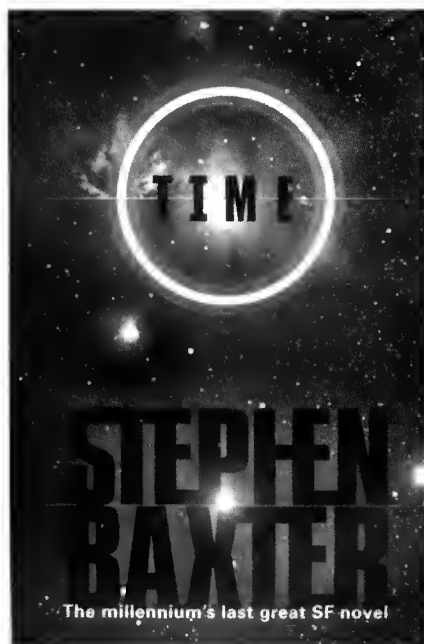
cosmology, he drives his narrative through ever larger perspectives.

There are two stories, running in parallel and feeding off each other. It is 2010. Space exploration has collapsed in the mire of NASA's political and strategic incompetence. Reid Malenfant, a cross between Richard Branson and Heinlein's Delos Harri-man, is an energetic millionaire who, after having failed NASA's astronaut selection procedures, has since made a fortune which he is investing in the exploitation of space. Specifically, he is secretly planning a one-way mission to a near-Earth asteroid, Criuthne, using discarded space shuttle boosters and a probe piloted by a squid whose intelligence has been enhanced by genetic engineering.

To the disgust of his ex-wife, Emma Stoney, a high-level executive in his corporation, Malenfant falls under the influence of Cornelius Tane, who convinces him (and, unbelievably quickly, most of the Earth's population), that calculations based on Brandon Carter's principles of mediocrity prove that universal extinction inevitably awaits humanity only a little way in the future. Massaging Malenfant's belief that the human species has a duty to spread through the galaxy, Tane encourages the millionaire to fund the construction of a Feynman radio able to receive instructions from inhabitants of the far future, downstreamers, and soon enough it does (almost nothing is done in sf novels without a predestined purpose, but in this sf novel predestiny is a vital ingredient of the plot).

Meanwhile (here's the second story), super-intelligent children, Blues, begin to appear as part of the downstreamers' meddling in their own history. One group of Blues escape their brutal confinement and relocate to the Moon, taking with them a "tinkerbelt," a nugget of quark material of potentially unlimited power. Malenfant's probe reaches Criuthne, and the squid, which (unknown to her human handlers) got herself pregnant before take-off, begins to colonize it. Her children not only discover a gateway which leads to the far future, but also build a spaceship to take them to the Trojan asteroids near Jupiter, far from human influence. Malenfant, Tane and Stoney, having taken one of the Blue children with them, and with the U.S. marines in hot pursuit, reach Criuthne too, and plunge through the gateway in search of mankind's destiny.

This ambitious, fast-paced narrative relies on bootstrapping momentum to generate a deeply necessary suspension of disbelief. From a beginning which, with its deployment of



plausible space technology, reminds us of his trio of hyper-realistic NASA novels, Baxter carries us forwards at a tremendous pace. There is a dizzying series of jumps as one of the squid, followed by a tiny robotic probe, plunges toward the end of the material universe and encounters a series of increasingly strange energy-hording hypercivilizations. There is an even dizzier race as Malenfant, Tane and Stoney are pursued by a vengeful marine through dozens of nascent universes budded from our own.

*Time* owes a huge debt to Arthur C. Clarke, specifically to Clarke's *Childhood's End* and Clarke and Kubrick's *2001*, but unlike those futures generated by Clarke's boundless optimism, Baxter's are grittier and grimmer. His characters are mostly knaves or fools. His spaceships are full of the stink of shit and vomit; unlike the reverent treatment of Clarke's emergent transhumans in *Childhood's End*, the Blues are imprisoned in concentration camps by panicky governments.

*Time's* baggy story also reworks tropes knowingly borrowed from a dozen or more sf classics, including Heinlein's *The Man Who Sold the Moon*, Blish's *A Clash of Cymbals* (aka *The Triumph of Time*), Benford's *Timescape*, Stapledon's *Star Maker*, and even (and this is not a masterpiece) Colin Kapp's *The Patterns of Chaos*. Not all borrowings are successfully revamped. Malenfant's protest that "This is a kind of cliché, you know" is not enough to reinvigorate the cliché of arriving in a 2001-style hotel room at the end of time. Rather better is the wry observation that the Blue children chose to set their never-never land in Tycho crater because it is the most famous crater on the moon (it's the location of *2001's* black monolith), despite the fact that it is inconveniently rugged and so far from the lunar equator that visiting NASA ships have to burn up far too much fuel to reach it.

Some of the writing shows evidence of haste, and the sprawling plot leaves a few loose ends; one would have liked to have known more about the nascent civilisation of the enhanced squid, for instance (although one half-suspects that more of their history will be found in the next volume of the trilogy). And only a few characters – notably Malenfant and one of the Blue children – are fully fleshed. Emma Stoney is mostly a naive recipient of long lectures by both Malenfant and Tane. Tane, whose philosophies are the crux of the novel, is not a convincing messiah or guru, and the global post-millennial panic induced by his espousal of the Carter catastrophe is revealed by the irritating disaster-novel technique of

swiftly generated and equally swiftly discarded disposable viewpoints.

Nevertheless, with its blend of cosmology, eschatology and rocket science, *Time* has plenty of the good stuff. It is fleet and densely worked, aches with dislocations of scale, and grapples with the vast implications of quantum mechanics and cosmological perspective with ambition and a great deal of brio.

**Shiva 3000** (Harcourt Brace, \$24), set in a far-future India where powerful machines are worshipped by the Hindu population, is the first novel by new Canadian writer Jan Jars Jensen. Young Rakesh and the Royal Engineer, Vasant, are thrown together after the destruction of a city by the juggernaut machine-god Jagannath. Vasant, having just escaped from a balloon on which he was trapped by members of the Kama Sutra cult, wants only to return to Delhi, where intrigue threatens the governance of India. Rakesh, the novel's narrator, has been charged by the god Shiva to hunt down and kill the Baboon Warrior, a human hero able to kill gods; Rakesh's bride-to-be has become part of the Baboon Warrior's entourage.

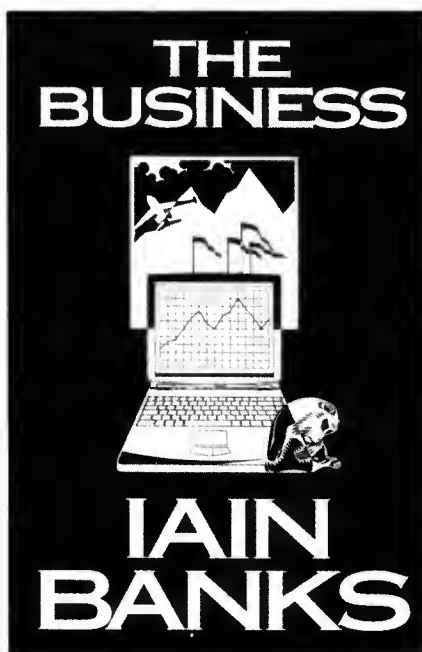
Their picaresque adventures, dogged by a mysterious and seemingly insane old man, are something of an inversion of the Chinese classic, *The Journey to the West*, in which a Buddhist monk and his magical monkey-protector travel across India. Here, Rakesh and Vasant, aided by monks of an order founded by a failed Buddhist missionary, travel in search of the monkey-protector of mankind. They fall in with the Pragmatic Monks, who not only invade and gain

partial control of the god Jagannath, which turns men into slaves who keep its machinery functioning, but also reveal to Rakesh a physiological basis for the faith which drives his quest. Gradually, his unlikely and quarrelsome alliance with Vasant begins to assume a larger significance.

Jensen's writing is strong and forcefully evocative. His colourful panoramas, crowded with bizarre inventions and strange characters, recall the planetary romances of Jack Vance or Roger Zelazny; the wilful misdirections which subvert the apparent clarity of its hero's narration are worthy of Gene Wolfe. There are monsters and battles, hypnotic filmee shows which corrupt men and women, encounters with giant cranes, the conquest of a city of the Kama Sutras, whose entire commerce is based on pleasure. The structure, though, is rather weaker than the technicolor showpieces. The vivid opening chapter, describing the awful fate of a crew of Buddhist missionaries, is only tangentially related to the rest of the discursive and episodic plot, and Jensen is slow in tangling Rakesh's holy mission with the political intrigue which exiled Vasant. Nevertheless, the patient reader will be amply rewarded by this strong and confident debut.

**The Science of Discworld** (Ebury Press, £14.99) is not, *pace* Lawrence M. Krauss's *The Physics of Star Trek*, an attempt to explain the wonders and oddities of the Discworld setting of Terry Pratchett's bestselling fantasy series. Instead, by an ingenious inversion of the book's title, Pratchett, mathematician Ian Stewart, and biologist Jack Cohen, use the magic and commonsense of Discworld to examine the deep structures which underpin our universe, from the Big Bang to the evolution of intelligence.

In odd-numbered chapters Pratchett tells the story of how a magical accident in the squash court of the Unseen University creates a strange singularity which (unlike Discworld) is governed by immutable rules and logic, and how Mustrum Ridcully, Ponder Stibbons, Rincewind (and his invincible Luggage), the Librarian and the rest of the Unseen University's crew follow the creation of chemical elements, stars, our own Roundworld, and the evolution of life. In even-numbered chapters Stewart and Cohen explain the reality which underpins the wizards' meddling, of how interaction of simple laws and rules lead to the complex consequences of the observable universe, and of the simplifications ("lies-to-





children”) science too often uses to comfort its audience. It’s an accessible and wide-ranging introduction to the way science works and what it works on with the bonus of a Discworld novella (or *vice versa*), highly recommended to any teenager with an awakening interest in science, and as a cure for anyone with a white-coat phobia.

#### Also noted:

Iain Banks’s *The Business* (Little, Brown, £16.99) is an ingenious thriller about a powerful multinational trading company, the eponymous Business, which has been in existence since the Roman Empire, operating with extreme discretion, internal financial transparency, and its own form of democracy. Kate Telman, a Level Three executive, embroiled in a plan to carry out a friendly takeover of a small Himalayan kingdom to ensure that the Business gets a seat on the United Nations, discovers a high-level conspiracy to embezzle funds for private gain. Following the trail around the world, she’s soon pitted against the most powerful people in the Business’s upper echelons.

Kate is a competent, likeable hero who triumphs through application of

her considerable intelligence rather than by brute force. The only shots fired are those aimed at a cinema screen in a game invented by a gungho American executive; Kate’s bold wit guys her conventionally romantic search for something to give meaning to her life.

Increasingly, Banks appears to be merging his alternating careers of mainstream and sf novelist. His last two novels, the mainstream *A Song of Stone* and the science-fictional *Inversions*, were thematically linked. The Business’s invisible penetration of history and the global economy, its benevolent plans for the undeveloped kingdom, and its vast, imaginatively deployed resources, echo the operation of the galaxy-spanning Culture of Iain M. Banks’s science-fiction novels. Like them, *The Business*, has some smart things to say about the morality of the deployment of power and wealth.

Brian Aldiss’s *When the Feast is Finished: Reflections on Terminal Illness* (Little, Brown, £16.99) is a sombre coda to his recent autobiography, *The Twinkling of an Eye*. Based on the journals of Aldiss and his wife Margaret, it describes with raw, unflinching and excruciating honesty the events of the three months between diagnosis of Mar-

garet’s pancreatic cancer and her death. We live in the age of the slick confessional piece, but this disturbingly intimate memoir of the relentless infiltration of terminal illness into family routine is, like John Bayliss’s description of the effects of Alzheimer’s on his wife Iris Murdoch, something deeper, a meditation on the unforgiving closure we all face, and a tender valediction.

**The Time Out Book of Paris Short Stories** (Penguin, £6.99) is the third in a series edited by Nicholas Royle (the first two covered London and New York). Only a few of the stories touch on the particularity of Parisian life; most are of exile or exiles, of Paris not so much a place but a palimpsest. Of genre interest are “Une étrange aventure de Richard Blaine,” Kim Newman’s pell-mell pulp story (Nazis! Monsters! Superheroes!) of how Richard Blaine escaped Paris after Ilsa dumped him; “Paris Noir,” Marc Werner’s account of an experimental photographic technique which reveals a disturbing phantom; and Christopher Kenworthy’s weird biopunk novelette “The Wishbone Bag.” A solid collection that’s just the right length to while away that Eurostar journey.

Paul J. McAuley

The media magazine *SFX* has a regular feature called “Isn’t It About Time You Gave X Another Chance?” – X being some piece of sf tat that few of us would want to give one chance, let alone two. Bonnie Langford in *Doctor Who*. The recording career of William Shatner. That robot in *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* that says “biddy-biddy-biddy.” Not to mention *Independence Day: They’re Back!*, *Feminists of Gor*, or *Ewoks: Invasion Earth 2150 AD*.

Well, things along those lines. Usually there’s a Defence and Prosecution, but the best of the series departs a little from the usual format. “Isn’t It About Time You Gave *Crime Traveller* Another Chance?” demands the page-filling headline – *Crime Traveller*, for the many who missed it, being a rapidly-cancelled BBC series about a pair of detectives who travel back in time to solve crimes, er, *before* they have happened... Anyway, you turn the page – to be confronted by a gigantic “NO!”, entirely filling a double-page spread.

I find myself feeling a bit this way about Marc Matz’s 21st-century private-eye adventure, *Nocturne for a Dangerous Man* (Tor, \$25.95). Perhaps crime and sf just don’t go together. The thought is tempting, but not really true: there is, after all, a long history of cross-fertilization

## From Hardboiled to Planetary Romance

Tom Arden

between the genres. Think how often crime, real or supposed, figures in sf stories. Scientific supervillains from Captain Nemo to DuQuesne to Lex Luthor come to mind. And what about the James Bond series?

But there’s more to this than pulp. The Clute and Nicholls *Encyclopedia* points out how many sf classics are concerned, in essence, with crime and

punishment: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Demolished Man*, to name a few. Then of course there’s *Blade Runner*, *Neuromancer* and the like, with their futuristic take on Hammet, Chandler and the mean streets.

It’s revealing, however, that most of these examples count as thrillers, spy stories or adventure stories of one sort or another – not as detective stories or murder mysteries. The detective story *per se* undoubtedly works best against a mundane background. In its classic form – *vide* Agatha Christie, *passim* – this sort of story sets up a familiar, cosy world, in which the advent of crime can only seem a shocking violation.

Later writers, following the American hardboiled school, have dispensed with the cosy backgrounds, but one principle remains: in a detective story, the crime has to be, *must* be, the most interesting thing that’s happening. Fill out your tale with sf weirdness, and you’re inviting trouble. If there’s no established order – or an unfamiliar one – then inevitably the focus of interest is divided. The author, it seems, is merely using sf to spice up a routine tale of detection, or foregrounding a crime to divert attention from lacklustre sf world-building.

Both charges could be made

against *Nocturne for a Dangerous Man*, which begins in true hardboiled style when Los Angeles investigator Gavilan Robie is hired by the harsh-featured, power-dressed lesbian president of an environment-wrecking multinational to save her gorgeous young lover from the eco-vigilantes who are holding her to ransom. (He really is: there's something distasteful about all this, and the prejudices it suggests.) He's got ten days. Naturally the air is thick with corruption, with disillusionment not far behind.

Little in the novel's futuristic scenario will surprise sf readers. The weather's gone crazy; parts of America have sunk under water; social decay grips those that remain. Big corporations rule everything. It's cyberpunk without the computers.

With the hero and his carefully-supplied eccentricities – he plays the cello, loves fine art, wears a cape – there is more than a hint of the TV script conference, circa 1970. Yet Matz is a better writer than one may at first think. Where the book picks up interest is not so much in the story as in the tone. That Robie should be middle-aged, with a fraught past behind him, is no doubt only another detective convention, but this is a book laden heavily with nostalgia. It's not really about the future, but the past.

Frequently Robie's thoughts drifts back to previous cases, as if there were already a long line of Robie mysteries, and this were a late entrant in the series. Notably, his artistic and musical interests are pre-technological. Then too, Los Angeles – in the 20th century, the quintessence of modernity – is here a shabby remnant, not new but old, its wealth and prestige long departed. Much of the novel can be glimpsed, it seems to me, in the contrast between the Turner seascape Robie invokes in the first chapter, and the 21st-century seascape which confronts him when he stands, later, on the California coast. Sea and sky are grey and there are no seabirds. They're all dead.

People used to say that American sf was upbeat, gung-ho, can-do stuff, filled with hope for the future – unlike the dreary, depressing Brit variety. But that hasn't been true for quite some time. What's happened to Americans? Nowadays even their most populist sf – *The X-Files*, for example, or a film such as *The Matrix* – is filled with implicit despair for human society and the possibilities of the human future. Matz's novel is another index of that despair.

Of several things that annoyed me in *Nocturne for a Dangerous Man*, top of the list comes the dated "Prologue" with which the nar-

rative begins. The novel proper is written in Robie's reflective, often garrulous first person; the Prologue, by contrast, is a movie-ish, third-person glimpse of the baddies in action – swift, violent and barely comprehensible. It's meant, of course, as a "teaser," a promise of excitement to come. Actually, it's just dispiriting – more an admission that, for much of what follows, we're going to be bored.

Sheri S. Tepper's *Singer from the Sea* (Avon Eos, \$24) begins with a woman in rags, running across the deserts of an alien planet. Who is she? Why is she running? Never mind, we're about to plunge back into the past, and not until the novel is nearly over shall we work back to the point at which we began. This is a different kind of cheat. Wouldn't it be more impressive to start with what looks like a climax, then just keep going, never flashing back, even though it looks certain that you will? It can be done – Scott Spencer's brilliantly-constructed novel *Endless Love* (1979) being a particularly fine case in point.

Tepper, however, can be faulted on little else. Forget the teaser: she doesn't need it (one suspects an interfering editorial hand), and once past it, soon reveals the storytelling power that has made her one of the most admired contemporary genre writers.

The setting is one of those far-future fantasylands, along the lines of Jack Vance's "Gaean Reach," in which humans have colonized many worlds. There's no galactic empire, but a loose federation of planets, differing widely in social arrangements. These include Haven, a world on which the colonists have rejected high technology, creating a way of life reminiscent of Europe before the Industrial Revolution. Travel is by horse and carriage. There are peasants and servants. There's a monarch, called the Lord Protector, and a complex system of nobility. Relations between the sexes are pre-feminist, to say the least.

At Blessingham's School, an academy for young ladies, the heroine Genevieve grows restless as the time draws near when she must be married. Two suitors appear on cue: the repulsive, elderly Prince Delagnor, whom her father seems to consider a perfect match, and Aufors Leys, the dashing but common young army officer with whom Genevieve rapidly falls in love. So far, so predictable, but Tepper has some surprises in store.

When her father is called to the Lord Paramount's court, Genevieve must go with him. In the city, she sees a lot more of Aufors Leys, and soon they are embroiled in mystery and danger. What is the dark secret of the Lord Paramount? How is it

that he seems to have lived for so long, far beyond his normal span? What is the strange substance, Haven's chief export, which the monarch trades for illicit technology? A scene in which we realize that modern, miniaturized surveillance devices are planted all over this 17th-century world has a marvellous eerie power. Tension rises impressively as Genevieve learns of the destiny which holds her in its grip, and the threat which may destroy civilization on Haven. In the end, the novel is both a satisfying romantic adventure and a powerful environmental fable.

Tepper is one of those writers who manages to be both prolific and polished. At times there is a sense of a too-easy facility – a sequence set in the tunnels beneath the Lord Protector's palace, where crazed stewards tend his vast, decaying collection of technological treasures, is like something out of Mervyn Peake, but it's Peake Lite, lacking real grotesquerie or gothic intensity. At the end there's a lot of stuff about the "world soul" – yes, and may the Force be with you – which some may dismiss as typical fantasy mush, but Tepper makes it convincing within the terms of the story.

The planetary romance – like its cousin, the space opera – is often dismissed as a merely populist subgenre, lacking the dignity of "serious" sf. Tepper reminds us that no form is inherently good or bad. It's what the author does with it that counts. Considered as a prediction of a likely future, *Singer from the Sea* can hardly be taken seriously. That doesn't matter: rather, it functions as a metaphor for our world, our society, our environment. And that's what fantasy does at its best.

There are some books which are so good – or seem so good – that you never want to read them again, just in case you should be disappointed. I've always felt this way about Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*, which I must have read about 25 years ago (I was quite young then) and have never dared to pick up since.

In the latest *Locus* poll, under "All-Time Best SF Author," Clarke comes third after Heinlein and Asimov. Well, trust Americans: I dare say I'd have put Wells first, but Clarke would certainly have come second. There may be other authors one enjoys as much, but Clarke has always seemed to me the epitome of the sf writer, a sort of classical instance of what an sf writer should be and do. He's also a test case for the potential sf reader. If you don't like *Childhood's End* or *The City and the Stars* or *2001: A Space Odyssey*, let's face it, you don't like sf.



Throughout his long career, Clarke has also been a prolific writer of non-fiction – most famously, the 1945 essay in *Wireless World* in which he outlined plans for the communications satellite. A version of this essay, which Clarke considers his single most important piece of writing, is included along with much else in his latest publication, ***Greetings, Carbon-Based Bipedsl: Collected Essays, 1934-1998***, edited by Ian T. Macauley (St Martin's Press, \$35).

First, some complaints. The subtitle is a con. It should be *Selected Essays* – if, as Clarke claims, he has written over a thousand such pieces, then his real *Collected Essays* will fill at least ten volumes of this size. Nor do we have anything from as early as 1934, when Clarke would have been 17 – the first piece dates from ten years later. The definition of “essay,” moreover, is sometimes rather generous. One turns with interest to a piece headed “Gene Roddenberry,” only to find two paragraphs of press-release tribute knocked out at the time of Roddenberry’s death: hardly an essay, collected or otherwise.

References to national or racial characteristics tend to be insulting, patronizing or both. A gentleman never insults or patronizes by accident, so I will refrain from making any such in connection with ***The Dedalus Book of Spanish Fantasy*** (£14.99, B-format, Margaret Jull Costa & Annella McDermott, ed. & trans.). Even so it’s difficult, when approaching a selection of stories by writers of whom one has never heard, to forget that these are the countrymen and contemporaries of Picasso, Dali and Miró, and that their works might well be just as accessible but for the accident of linguistic evolution.

Inaccessibility works both ways. Castilian, Catalan and Galician speakers who don’t happen to be fully literate in English are cut off from the mainstream fantastic tradition, English not only having provided its most copious inputs, but also being the language of first choice for translation from every other tongue. Consequently, I got from this volume a sense of a not-quite-alien tradition, differing in emphasis from the Anglo-American – as if from a world where Poe, Bradbury and Sturgeon all wielded much heavier influence. It’s arranged alphabetically by author, which I regret as I much prefer a temporal arrangement, but it seemed to me that Spain has a stronger penchant for the bizarre and the inexplicable than for the macabre or the horrific. That noted, the gruesome is strongly represented, with much

The book is arranged in chronological order, in sections representing the decades of Clarke’s career. Clarke contributes new prefatory material to each section, and often to individual essays too – all of which is welcome, but at times it’s unclear where the new material ends and the old begins, nor in what ways the old material has been edited. Sources – the where-and-when of original publication – are given only at the end of the book, and there’s no index.

That said, this is still a book one is glad to have until something more definitive appears. Clarke is a highly readable essayist, always engaging, and the topics range far and wide: from Lord Dunsany to Stanley Kubrick, from Leonard Woolf to Robert A. Heinlein, from Sri Lanka to cybernetics, with a great deal of futurology, both serious and satirical. There are pieces on UFOs and the paranormal. There are valuable reflections on the art of writing (“Someone once said that writing a work of fiction consists of the elimination of alternatives”). The book concludes with a not-wholly-facetious chronicle of the future, in which

Clarke predicts, year by year, the principal events of the 21st century.

Inevitably, it is space exploration which gives the book its major theme, one to which Clarke returns again and again. Not the least part of his importance as a writer lies in his optimistic sense of possibility, of the opportunities that lie before us if we have the sense to grasp them. “The last quarter of this century will be an age of exploration such as Man has never known before,” he declares in the *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society*, December 1946. “By the year 2000, most of the major bodies in the Solar System will probably have been reached...”

I read this on the 30th anniversary of the Apollo 11 landing. The day’s other main news story was, yet again, about Northern Ireland. What happened to the future? Doesn’t anyone remember that Dan Dare took off for Venus, and met the Mekon, in 1996? We can hardly forget that 2000 – not to mention 2001 – is nearly upon us.

No doubt some would say Clarke is naïve, but if so, there’s something admirable in his naivety. We should have more of it.

Tom Arden

## Much Madness and Some Humour

Chris Gilmore

madness and plenty of live burials (of which Wenceslao Fernández Flórez’s “How My Six Cats Died” is the best), but many of the stories are content to present a vision, for which no logic is required, rather than to tell a tale, wherein effect should follow cause.

Certainly, the oldest tale in the book, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s “The Kiss” is one of the weakest – a very

conventional vengeful ghost story, reflecting the anti-French feeling of the mid-19th century, and strongly reminiscent of French tales from slightly later, where the Germans are cast as the bad guys – while to me the best was one of the very few that attempt humour. Eduardo Mendoza’s “No News from Gurb,” a “morons from outer space” story, works brilliantly, for all that the humour is very broad and must have been correspondingly tricky to translate. But the translators have done an excellent job throughout; when a story failed for me I always found myself blaming the author rather than them.

Some failures stem directly from the cultural divide. Quim Monzo’s “Gregor” is such a blatant *homage* to Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” that I was bound to find it old hat, while Ramón J. Sender’s “Cervantes’ Chickens” (which also concerns a metamorphosis) depends on a familiarity with *Don Quixote* which I lack. Even so, the successes far outnumber the failures; this is an interesting, well-balanced selection of the unfamiliar, especially recommended to admirers of Bradbury, Sturgeon and Poe.

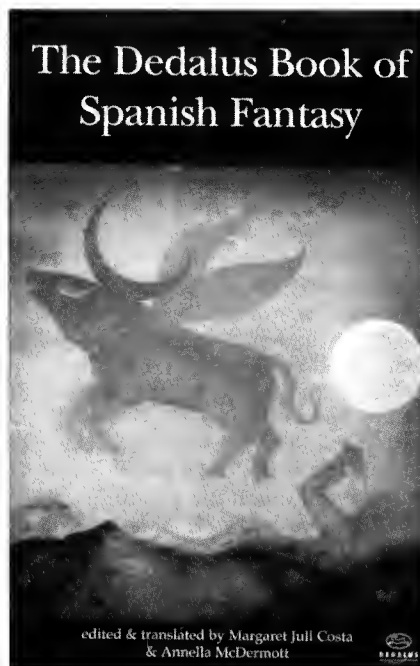
Eric Brown’s last two novels were juveniles in the shared-world *Web* series. Nothing wrong with that, but the juvenile approach has spilled over into his latest for adults, ***Penumbra*** (Millennium, £5.99), creating a piously laboured effect. Two plots run in parallel. In the first Josh and Ten

are unfairly blamed for almost writing off a shuttlecraft (it *wasn't* their fault – honest!) by Redwood Corp., their unsympathetic employer, only to be taken on by a grandfatherly billionaire who hires them for an exciting mission into the galactic unknown (so boo and sucks to Redwood). In the second meteorically (and quite properly – she's *good*) promoted 23-year-old police lieutenant Rana Rao is removed from her favoured patch (liaising with cute if slightly criminal Calcutta street-children) to the Homicide Division, where her fatherly but attractive chief reckons she's just what he needs to bust a serial killer of uncommon ingenuity who always leaves his victims with a trademark mutilation (a Latin cross, wrongly described throughout as a crucifix).

By way of unification, we're told early on that Rana is actually the billionaire's missing daughter, and (presumably) heiress to a good chunk of his billions (yum yum! and especially relevant as he's dying of a wasting disease) but not why she's gone missing (the serial killer knows something about that, but not what her cover is). All very well if you're 13 max; but as this is allegedly adult fare, Brown feels the need to stir some adult pre-occupations into the mix. Poor Josh has never really gotten over the death of his ten-year-old sister, and has an unhealthy, pseudo-sexual relationship with an AI/hologram combination which provides a kid-sister substitute but undermines his relationships with grown women. Poor Ten (who's a pretty black/oriental cross, and at 32 much the height and weight of a typical Caucasian ten-year-old) has become enmeshed in an extreme form of Buddhism which prevents her from having any fun in this life, which is to her a mere portal into the bliss of non-existence.

Ah me! How (and with whom) will these two lost lambs find the true happiness which is their right? And how will Rana (and her boss, and her inheritance, and the interesting fruits of the mission, and the serial killer) fit in? The answer, sadly, is not at all. Both plots lurch from far-fetched coincidence to rank absurdity, finally converging to drown in an over-sweetened mush of banal mysticism where everyone gets top prize. Rarely have I been so disappointed in a book by a respected author. Brown's stories in *Interzone* have always been imaginatively constructed, engagingly written and led to some sort of point. This has few of those virtues

Jonathan Carroll's *The Marriage of Sticks* (Gollancz, £16.99) is another odd hybrid, and another failure, though in a far less commonplace



mode. Until somewhat over halfway it reads like a typical example of American smart-set fiction. Miranda, the first-person protagonist, makes a good living buying cheap to sell dear in the antiquarian book market; as it's a highly imperfect market which she understands better than most, basic economic theory proclaims that she can make abnormal profits – which she does, and good on her. The downside is that her work requires her to suck up to bibliophiles, who are the most vulgar and philistine of all materialists, caring not a jot if what is written in the books they buy is beautiful or even true, but only for such superficial arcana as whether it's

truly a first edition, or if the inscription is signed by someone famous.

This has subtly coarsened Miranda, not so much by making her more materialistic as by imposing upon her the same vulgarity; she has come to accept their naff spiritual pretensions at face value. Consequently she falls in love (if that's the word) with Hugh, "an art expert. He travelled the world telling people what they had, or should buy." Carroll has some deft touches which bring out the self-absorption of both characters, and their ignorance of everything outside their own fields. For instance, Miranda has not only forgotten the maiden name of her closest friend from school, she has forgotten that it was different from her married name; and Hugh believes mango chutney must be a rare and exotic delicacy because it comes from India.

Such are the smart-set avatars of literature and art, and they're made for each other; only trouble is, Hugh has a wife, Charlotte, who doesn't mind his casual affairs but cuts up rough when he moves in with Miranda. At this point Hugh abruptly and inexplicably dies, and the book, which has so far contained no supernatural element beyond one sighting of the ghost of Miranda's deceased boyfriend, goes into fantasy overdrive. The mode is complex, and I don't intend to reveal it, though the atmosphere is reminiscent of Fellini's *Juliet of the Spirits*, and some of the ideas are familiar from the Sylan episode in Cabell's *The Silver Stallion*. An interesting combination, and skilfully handled, but it's here that the book fails for me.

It's presented as a fantasy of redemption, which implies a moral purpose; yet what we get is the altruist fallacy in its crudest possible form. Miranda has, for reasons never given, an unearned gift of immense value.

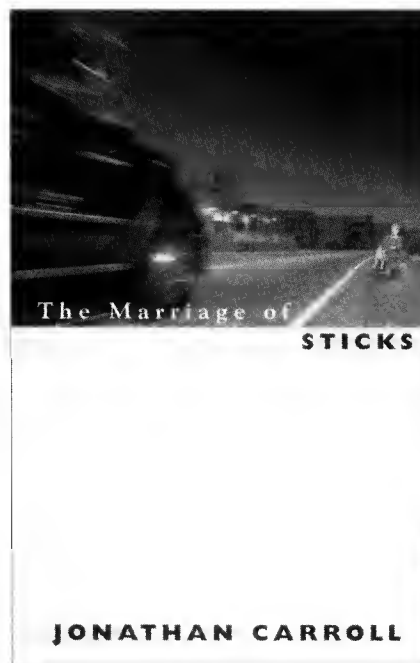
How best to prove her spiritual regeneration?

– To give it away.

Who should receive it?

– She should bypass someone she loves and to whom she owes a duty, in favour of someone whom she has no cause to love, and who has never done anything for her, for that is most altruistic.

The trouble with such logic is that the recipient will now hold the unearned gift. How best...? The obvious conclusion, if you accept the fallacy, is that all such gifts will wind up in the hands of the least deserving. I don't accept it, but it seems that Carroll does, for he tacks on an ending no less gross in its sentimentality than Brown's – the predictable consequence when a writer fails to confront the



implications of what he has written. Writers of lesser pretention tend to bring their heroes back from the dead – say it not in Gath, but Jack Vance did that in an early story, and so did David Gemmell. Both grew out of it, so perhaps Carroll will too, but I'm pessimistic. From the technical standpoint he's already high in the second rank, though short of the first. He embeds original little fables in his text, for instance, and he does it well, though not as well as Aldiss, Wolfe and Le Guin at their best. I expect this book to be praised, therefore, and praised highly, by reviewers who know no better. Include me out.

After which I turn with relief to something a lot more conventional. Glenda Noramly's *Havenstar* (Virgin, £5.99) is set in the usual sort of fantasy world (late-medieval technology, magic that works) and features a conventional heroine. Keris is frustrated by a restrictive society where her gender debars her from fol-

lowing her adored father into his fascinating but dangerous profession (for which, moreover, she shows natural talent) and on his death reduces her to a chattel of her foolish and insensitive brother. His immediate ambition is to marry her off to a loutish friend so that they can invest her dowry in a get-rich-quick scheme of very questionable morality.

Naturally she decamps hurriedly into the "unstable" (= magically active) area which surrounds her home village, and just as naturally falls in with a heterogeneous party of fellow travellers, many of whom aren't quite what they seem. They're on a pilgrimage, not a quest, but if this is very much the usual mixture it's none the less well done for that. The minor characters are vividly differentiated; incidents along the way, including encounters with a very fine devil, sustain the suspense; the descriptive passages are well above average. Best of all the McGuffin, which appears early, has exceptional

appeal: it's a map of a distant region, and such a map as we all meet in dreams, but never elsewhere. When you look at it closely it becomes an aerial view of the territory itself, and all in perfect detail, down to the shadows of passing clouds and the figures of traversing men – or monsters.

An excellent entertainment, and I have only three small cavils. In the opening chapters we're treated to rather too many of Keris's embittered reflections at the injustice of her home society; being precisely those which our own has shed they have no current relevance. Noramly should have restrained herself from preaching to the converted; her vivid devil is deplorably mismatched against a hopelessly nondescript God. And I deplore equally her failure to distinguish may from might. None of these faults is any less reprehensible for being common, and they blemish an otherwise excellent if unambitious first novel. I look forward to more and better.

Chris Gilmore

In person, he's *Pete* Crowther and he's a hale and hearty Yorkshireman, with a distinctive accent, and he's a friend. But in print, he's *Peter* Crowther and he's a prison-van of scary strangers, all with different voices (often American) and verbal tics; he has a multiple personality; he's a silver-tongued spiv, with a toolbox and a stocking that he won't think twice about using... As the saying goes, I wouldn't like to meet him in a dark alley.

Peter Crowther's first collection, *The Longest Single Note and Other Strange Compositions* (Cemetery Dance, \$40), is mesmerizing. His range is impressive. From the poignant "All We Know of Heaven," in which a boy must face up to the fact that his mother will not recover from her accident, while simultaneously having to confront events at school; to the fantasy of "Forest Plains." From the bar-room and its drunken conversations, not to mention its fairyland changelings, in "Stains on the Ether"; to the tales that deal with cats, "Shatsi" and "Dumb Animals." From "The Visitor," in which a girl and her dog are raped by a supernatural force that resembles a "radioactive penis" and which carries a warning from the author, to the tale that *should* carry a warning from the author ("In Country"), in which – among other brutalities – an adulterous woman is smacked on the head so hard that her brain is dislodged (it makes sense in context); the brain is then chased along the floor as it is used in a gruesome form of Tin Can Alley – as target practice. These latter examples illustrate, of

course, that Crowther pulls no punches in his fiction.

Speaking of the forbidden, the spirits of H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith live on in "Gallagher's Arm." Fissures to the otherworld are possible, but consideration must be given as to where the hole appears on our side of the divide. A man starts to lose a limb... Loss of a different kind is highlighted in the filthy pollen of "Cankerman," a story which glues up the senses with the tragedies it delineates. Where does cancer really come from? What happens when a child dies of it? And would you take on the disease if it meant that your loved one could be saved?

## Soul Trains

David Mathew

Crowther has been compared, at various times, and favourably, with writers such as Ramsey Campbell, Charles Beaumont, Richard Matheson, Rod Serling, and most often with Ray Bradbury; and these comparisons are fair. But references to music would also seem appropriate. *The Longest Single Note* is a vicious twist of the radio dial, and all of the stations get airplay, however odd the broadcast. Sometimes a story has the feel of a compressed classical piece; and often a story has the off-centre, slightly-out-of-tune quality of, say, the pianist Thelonius Monk. But Zappa is also here; Dylan, Hendrix, Coltrane and Parker, too; not to mention any number of opiate-rockers. The vibes are strong. This book is a mash of discordant pieces, the individual strengths of which might be that they cannot be compared to one another. They clash. There's some poetry, there's some previously unpublished work. There is "Head Acres," which was in *Interzone* in 1993; it involves a young man who can sing paths and sometimes objects into existence. It is mean, dreamy and trippy. There are nigh-on 400 pages of quality; there is thought, and anger, and soul... These stories are full of semibreves and semi-breaths, misting up the mind. Angelic, demonic, and above all, strange.

Music also wafts, like dope smoke, through the 1967 depicted in Robert Irwin's *Satan Wants Me* (Dedalus, £14.99). Strictly speaking, this book is outside *Interzone's* remit, being the diary of a young man who becomes involved with Satanists, first

willingly, but with increasing uneasiness... But arguably, the drugs sequences lead to trips that are of a sufficiently psychedelic nature to qualify as fantasy. Peter is forced to submit his diary to his superiors, who correct his grammar ("You were not asked to keep a scrappy mess of notes about your remarkably uninteresting days"), and insist he dump his nice girlfriend, because she's not suitable. (She's worried about his involvement, for one thing.) Very soon another girlfriend, who is temporarily virginal ("Blast off!") is found; her name is Maud, and she is a hairdresser, with plenty of Satanic potential. Peter, on meeting her and getting her to succumb to his charms, starts sliding further away from reality. Because of Lodge activities, he cannot be at the bedside of his dying mother, for example.

There is a good deal of sex and a good deal of wit in Irwin's writing. For example: "To breakfast on goat's blood is not a pleasant experience. Fortunately, this was followed by a proper breakfast back in the house. I had kedgeree and black pudding..." And it is always pleasant to discover a writer who can make drugs seem interesting to a drugs non-user. Quite often, drugs-writing elaborates on how great drugs are but forgets to include the reader in the work, thereby making the experiences tedious.

When an advertisement for the work of Frank Ryan appeared on the back cover of the April 1999 edition of *Interzone*, it caused a discussion at EasterCon. Who was Frank Ryan? And why did he have the name of a character in a Pogues song? (Of course, this query seems like nonsense now; but I include it for the sake of accuracy.) Who the hell were Swift Publishers? And what was with the titles that had been used before, including *Tiger Tiger*? Crafty old Pringle, we thought; it's an April Fool's joke... All of which just goes to show that conventions and attempts at logical thinking should never mix, because Frank Ryan has written two works of highly-regarded non-fiction (about diseases), and *The Sundered World* (Swift, £16.99) is at least his fourth novel. You live and learn.

Based partly on Irish myths and legends, it is the first volume of a series involving a character called Alan Duval. In *The Sundered World*, on the mean streets of London, Duval has a fight with hooligans who beat him purple. His life is saved by a strange feral woman whom Duval recognizes from the past, when she wasn't so feral. The "girl," as she is denoted throughout, had disap-

peared. When Duval comes to, he is in a strange land of snow and ice, being tended to by an old crone who feeds him nutritious slop and mends his wings. They establish communication, and Duval soon learns that he has an important role to play in the development of the magical land:

"Let there be no uncertainty of what is expected of you," he is told. "You must find a way to destroy your enemy. Yet this will be no easy quest. For your enemy is the darkest malignancy that was ever spawned from the foul pits of eternity... he is known as the Tyrant of the Wastelands." Not that Duval wants anything to do with such responsibility (or with such portentous clichés), of course: as he continues to maintain, he is *simply a scientist*.

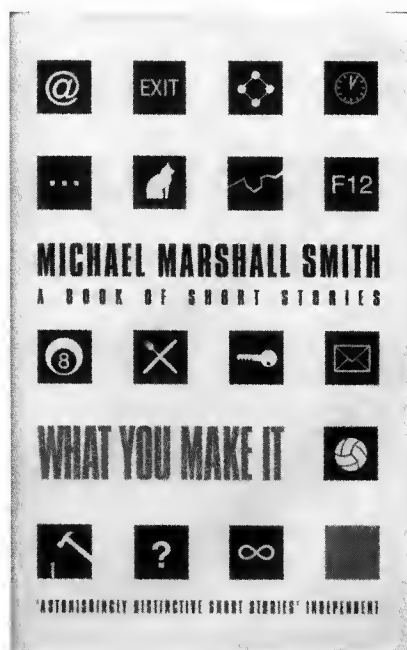
There follows a well-handled trek through monstrous wastes; then Duval, having reached the sea, comes across a people who carry him onto a boat. He can read their thoughts, and they think he's their "saviour" (they won't take no for an answer). "Only the Mage Lord of legends could carry such power," they claim. To Duval it becomes clear that his current state of disembodiment has something to do with an expedition of which he was part, years earlier. ("It was Alan who had thought of mixing the water from the three rivers to invoke the triple goddess of the Celts.") There are frequent flashbacks.

*The Sundered World* is traditional in plot and theme, and lovers of quests will snuggle up to its world, enchanted. It recalls, a little, Kenneth C. Flint and the "Sidhe" sequence; and the writing, in large, has the pace of pulp fiction and is adequately handled. Every now and then, however, the editing could have

been more efficient: the reader slams his nose against *precisely* the wrong word for the sentence, or an over-elaborated passage, such as this: "He was puzzled that she was no longer leaving tracks in the snow. How was it possible that where there had once been prints of her bare feet... now there was no impression to mark her passing... she seemed less robust, somehow less substantial. *No footprints!* He wondered how she could leave no footprints." So as not to be accused of quoting out of context, I will quickly add that I have compressed 89 words of Ryan's prose into 54 of my own, but I'm sure you get the idea – as insistently, as the reader of the novel will.

Life is what you make it, and *What You Make It* (HarperCollins, £12.99) is about Life – or at least about Michael Marshall Smith's view of Life, which is frequently admonitory, caustic and bleak, but sometimes funny. It is certainly a powerful collection. It brought to mind a line that had recently been quoted at me in another context, which was: "You see a film at home; you *experience* a film at the cinema." More even than his novels are, these stories are experiences, and (it might be only me, but I doubt it) I found I could make comparisons with my own life on reading plenty of these tales, however far-fetched they were. In "Always," for example, a young woman, who has been close to her parents, loses her mother to illness. Naturally, she is devastated; and although my own mother is passably healthy, I couldn't help but blink into the void. *That* is what Smith excels at: making the reader search out feelings. In this particular story, because the father has long since mastered the art of wrapping presents, there is a wildly illogical but beautifully appropriate conclusion.

"Always" is but one of the stories that shows of Smith's obsession with time, and what you make of it. In "More Tomorrow," the computer-guy finds pictures of the work-colleague he has started to fancy, up on the Internet in a porn-group. Every day the photographs get more hardcore, both in terms of the sexual acts portrayed, and in terms of the violence that has evidently been perpetrated against her to get her to acquiesce to such indignities. A vow is made to sort the situation out. In "Later," a bereaved boyfriend digs up his newly-buried love, unable to live without her for all time. (This one also had me staring into space...) In "Diet Hell," a man uses a jerry-made time machine to solve the problem of his expanding waist.







The talent that Smith has, it seems, is in having found the perfect voice. His plot ideas, as good as they often are, come second to the seductive way of telling; he has a chatty style but it is what used to be called "deceptively simple". This book is not 400 pages of single-clause sentences! But the voice is shared from one tale to the next, with a few examples, such as "Sorted" – in which a mad-for-it footballer reveals more

about his darker side than any tabloid could. It goes rather further than booze and blondes... On top of what has already been mentioned, there are the well-known stories, "The Dark Land" and "The Man Who Drew Cats," both of which work well on a re-reading.

When I interviewed Jonathan Carroll a few months ago, we talked about our mutual admiration for the Japanese author, Haruki Murakami.

I asked what was so appealing, and Carroll simply shrugged and offered, "He knows how to dance..." All fiction should evoke emotion, but it is the reader's choice to distil these feelings into sentences with sensible shoes and a grip on reality. (Not many book reviews, for example, will make a reader cry.) *What You Make It* has good rhythm, and Michael Marshall Smith also knows how to dance.

David Mathew

Society publications are usually way ahead of other small-press projects, simply because of the backing they receive. At last count the BFS had just over 900 members; the type of circulation that new magazines can only dream of. In this column for *Interzone*, I cover two long-established societies (The British Fantasy Society, The British Science Fiction Association) and two smaller organizations (The Preston Speculative Fiction Association, The New Kent Fantasy Society). I hope everybody finds something to their taste.

*Vector* is the bimonthly review-zine of the British Science Fiction Association. To summarize, #204 contained a feature on fantasy author Peter S. Beagle and an editorial focusing on Paul Kincaid who, it seems, has recently stepped down as reviews editor. The more recent issue (*Vector* #205) contains comment on the definition and construction of fantasy, an in-depth analysis of Jorge Luis Borges, science-fiction film music, and a continuation of Paul Kincaid's "Cognitive Mapping" series of articles. Readers of *Interzone* might like to take note of "Keeper of the Web," an interview I conducted with regular contributor Keith Brooke before Christmas. Although short and presented in straight question-and-answer format, it gives an account of Keith's projects both past, present and future. Also, the *Vector* editor has included a complete bibliography of Keith's work, which is just as informative as the interview. The reviews section focuses on recently-published works of fiction from a few of the major British and American sf/fantasy houses. It also covers some non-fiction works including Gary Westfahl's *The Mechanics of Wonder* (Liverpool University Press, £14.99) and a variety of publications from Steve Sneyd's poetry-forge "Hill-top Press."

*Prism UK* is the bimonthly newsletter of the British Fantasy Society. The March/April 1999 issue contains a glossy coloured cover provided courtesy of HarperCollins' "Voyager" imprint. Inside, you'll find a wide variety of features including Chaz Brenchley's updated analysis of the Ten Commandments, interviews

with Stephen Laws and Nicholas Royle, and reviews covering everything from *Tower of the King's Daughter* by Chaz Brenchley to the television tie-in *Sesame Street Unpaved* (although how this relates to fantasy fiction is anyone's guess...). A few niggles: the news column is a little out of date and I feel that the club/society section should be given greater coverage. Also, the British Fantasy Society remains a place more suited to the modern horror fan than to followers of Tolkien, Eddings and Pratchett. A number of Britain's most successful fantasy writers are not members of the BFS for precisely this reason. Recent *special publications* from the BFS include a professionally-produced chapbook dedicated to horror author Graham Masterton.

I didn't like the 9th issue of *Kimota*, basically because I enjoy sf and fantasy a good deal more than horror, and #9 was a horror special. Thankfully, #10 is a vast improvement. It carries an entertaining interview with dwarf actor Kenny Baker, who played R2-D2 in the original *Star Wars* trilogy (and has been re-hired for the prequels). However, instead of focusing on Kenny's career high, the interview is largely concerned with the Terry Gilliam-directed fantasy

*Time Bandits*. Fans of this film will find much to delight them here. A few very interesting facts are thrown in for good measure; Kenny still receives the odd \$25 royalty cheque when the films are shown in the USA. The fiction in *Kimota* #10 is also fairly strong, with enjoyable work from Neil Asher, Paul Finch and Joel Lane. In conclusion; a sturdy issue, despite the enormous drag-factor of Peter Tennant's dire "comic-variations."

*Obelisk* is a sapling project from the New Kent Fantasy Society (formerly run by a collective of authors and artists including myself). From the sample issue I have seen, *Obelisk* is a single sheet publication in a similar format to David Langford's *Ansi-ble* (but firmly focused on fantasy) with letters, an RPG column, lengthy comment from the editor(s) and details of forthcoming NKFS projects.

*Vector* (A4, 36pp) Part of a package free to members of the BSFA. The package also includes *Matrix* and *Focus* (respectively a bimonthly newsletter containing comment and opinions, and a biannual magazine publishing articles and some original fiction). Annual membership fee of £19 payable to "The British Science Fiction Association" from Paul Billinger, Membership Secretary, 1 Long Row Close, Evedon, Daventry, Northants NN11 3BE.

*Prism UK* (A5, 36pp) Part of a package free to members of the BFS. Benefits include a number of special publications each year, and a discount on attendance fees for Fantasycon, the BFS convention. Annual membership £20 payable to "The British Fantasy Society" from Robert Parkinson, BFS Secretary, 2 Harwood Street, Stockport, Cheshire SK4 1JJ.

*Kimota* #10 (A5, 52pp) £2.50/£9 for four from Graeme Hurry, Preston Speculative Fiction Association, 52 Cadley Causeway, Preston PR2 3RX. All monies payable to "Graeme Hurry."

*Obelisk* #1 (A4, 2pp) from Russell Chambers, Kent Fantasy Society (Editorial), 54 Hollicondane Road, Ramsgate, Kent CT11 7PH. Stamped, self-addressed envelope with each enquiry. You can e-mail KFS on RHChambers@compuserve.com

David Lee Stone

## Magazine Reviews

David Lee Stone

Kim Newman, a long-time contributor to *Interzone*, combines his love of alternative realities, dreamscapes, game-worlds and popular media in *Life's Lottery* (Simon & Schuster £16.99). The reader is prescribed the role of Keith Marion, a white, middle-class 40-year-old. Having survived the trials of actually being born, you find yourself in a school playground. Here you are confronted by a bullying gang of *Man from U.N.C.L.E.* fans who ask you an apparently simple question: who do you like, Napoleon Solo or Ilya Kuryakin? Your answer sets you along a complex loop of interconnected alternative realities in which Marion meets a motley cast of characters again and again and again.

*Life's Lottery* will be familiar territory for those familiar with Newman's work. He has tackled dream-alternative realms in works such as *The Night Mayor*, and is no stranger to the world of role-playing, having written for Games Workshop under the pseudonym of Jack Yeovil. The book also owes something to Luke Rhinehart's cult novel *The Dice Man* but, unlike Rhinehart's anti-protagonist who is content to base his every action on the throw of a dice, Newman insists that making choices is the only way to be truly alive.

Like life, *Life's Lottery* presents you with choices, then shows you the consequences. You can make your choices in different ways. You can become Keith Marion, invest him with your personality and have him make the choices that you would make in the same situation. Conversely, you can play a benign or malevolent god and base Marion's decision on what you believe will be the best or worst outcome for him. I tried both approaches with unexpected results.

First, I became Marion and chose Ilya Kuryakin. This had the kind of disastrous outcome that I have come to expect from decisions I make in life. I was labelled "a girl" by the gang members and then, after a nasty incident with school custard, "mad" by everyone else. To add insult to injury, the author assured me that I would now be known as a girl for the rest of my life. And what a life it was. Several cowardly choices later, I had a lesbian daughter, a cyberpunk son and a voracious sexual appetite that was scarcely satiated by a string of lovers. Then things became really weird. Evicted from a squat, I teamed up with my brother to exact revenge on my childhood tormentors at a torture camp masquerading as a team building course in the Welsh mountains. Despite, or because of all this, I was amazed to achieve a happy ending in a denouement which revealed that all the alternate lives Marion could live were inter-related. I started the book again.

## Deep Choices

Tim Robins

On my second read-through, I adopted the role of a beneficent god and turn Marion into the kind of drearily conventional man's man I have secretly aspired to be. I chose Napoleon Solo. Years of camaraderie followed, as I knew they would. I was one of the lads at last: I was never without friends or women, or women who were friends. Things seemed to be going so well that I never imagined I would end my life by planting a bomb on a lottery show and blowing up myself along with Bob Monkhouse and the audience in a paranoid act of terrorism.

Of course, in the end, Newman, as the book's author or "dungeon-master," is the only omniscient intelligence governing Marion's world (or worlds). That's part of the fun of playing the novel as a game. Like life,

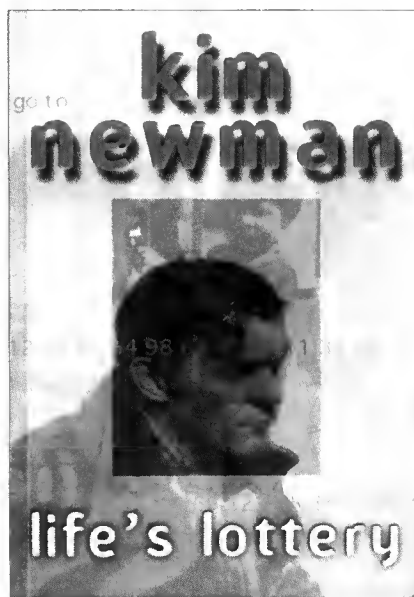
your actions have unintended consequences. Newman's gradual fleshing out of Marion's past ensures you are never fully yourself (would that I could have that much sex) and only ever a demi-god (exactly which decision led me to disaster?). Newman also keeps wrong-footing you by sending Marion lurching from past to present and across alternative timelines. The result is sense of ontological giddiness as you try to orientate your past to your present. In a leap from the 1960s to the 1980s, I discovered my brother had gone from wetting himself in a copse to enlisting in the army, fighting in the Falklands and returning home a war hero.

Sometimes your present decisions actually reshape Marion's past. It is here that Newman's light, breezy style touches on something quite profound. His story demonstrates the way past events can take on different meanings depending on the emotional state of the person recalling them in the present. *Life's Lottery* also provides an exploration of the way individual life-courses are connected to history via the temporality of institutions such as school, work and even television. Marion's recollections bind together time and space, bringing together again people and places of the past. In this way memory and dreaming are forms of world-building not unlike role-playing.

For me, Newman is best at recreating the landscape of childhood. He seems most at home with the media icons of the 1960s, its toys, tunes and television programmes. Newman is the same age as Marion and much of this, including his obsession with *Doctor Who*, seems autobiographical. Newman's recreation of school life is also spot on, from school custard to the 11-Plus, but Marion's adulthood tends to spiral off into implausible gangsterism and sudden violence (as Marion, you can be shot, blown up or die ignominiously in a ditch).

Newman never quite comes to grips with the weighty issues that underlie the questions of choice that confront his characters and us. Britain's National Lottery provides an unsatisfactory metaphor for life; even Newman recognizes our lives aren't entirely governed by chance. Instead, *Life's Lottery* is an enjoyable roller-coaster ride for a readership at home in a world of cult TV and hardboiled fiction. So buy this book or don't buy this book. It's your choice. But take my advice. If you do by this book and you are offered the choice between having a *Doctor Who* day or having a *Star Trek* day, choose to have a *Doctor Who* day. If nothing else, you'll finish the book with a smile on your face.

Tim Robins





**B**ernice Summerfield, a 26th century professor of archaeology, was originally a *Doctor Who* companion who appeared in a number of spinoff novels published by Virgin. Big Finish Productions have since adapted some of her adventures as a series of 110-minute audio plays, starring Lisa Bowerman as the feisty archaeologist, and Stephen Fewell as her ex-husband Jason Kane. Former *Doctor Who* actors turn up as guest stars, but because all the *Who* references have been carefully excised (apart from some very obscure ones), the plays are readily accessible to the complete newcomer. It could even be argued that, what with the severing of any links to its origins, the range can be regarded as original sf in its own right rather than spinoffery.

Not that I would want to argue this myself.

The range gets off to a pretty terrible start with *Oh No It Isn't!*, a woe-ful attempt at comedy by Bernice's creator Paul Cornell. For some unconvincing reason, Bernice finds herself trapped in a pantomime. And that's it; material suitable for an amusing two-minute sketch is stretched to nearly two unbearable hours. Fortunately it is not required listening.

*Beyond the Sun* was a legendary unused title from the early days of *Doctor Who*, subsequently requisitioned by Matt Jones for a novel. The play benefits greatly from the fact that much of the novel's padding has been adapted out. The clash of two cultures, one anarchic, the other phiteer (that is to say, ours) is handled extremely well in places; there's something remarkably convincing about the anarchists' well-meaning attempts to understand how we tick – and something remarkable about Jones's ability to look at our culture from another's point of view without descending into bathos. Most of the action takes place on the planet Ursu, in obvious homage to Ursula Le Guin; it has even been suggested, rather fatuously, that Jones's story transcends its source material ("Interaction," *Interzone* 139). On the whole it's a good listening experience, marred by the self-congratulatory tone as Bernice finds the supposedly clever (but actually very stupid) solution to the mystery at the heart of the story.

Whereas real sf writers anticipate the reader's questions and objections, spinoffery writers are generally content to reproduce the tropes and images of the genre, but not its intellectual rigour. In the subsequent plays, for instance, we learn that the wedding rings of Jason and Bernice allow them to travel anywhere in time. We also learn that, so long as

they are not in their own time, they no longer age. So, thinks the average listener, why are they so keen to return to the time they left – and not, say, a minute earlier? This and other equally obvious questions are not addressed.

The Time Rings provide a framework for a trilogy of plays beginning with *Walking To Babylon*. Jason has got involved with some dangerously powerful People who have ended up in ancient Babylon; some equally powerful People have given Bernice two days to get them to come home before they destroy the city and change history. Kate Orman's novel, on which this is based, is very good sf in its own right. The play doesn't have quite the depth or the atmosphere, despite the sound effects of a crowded market place and the like, and suffers from the increasingly tiresome comedy routines. On the other hand it benefits from Elisabeth Sladen's presence as the likeable priestess Ninan, and has a nifty cliff-hanger ending. The play is followed by a very informal chat with the two leads.

The cliff-hanger is resolved in Nigel Robinson's *Birthright*, and sees Bernice arriving in 1909 London, where giant locusts are murdering prostitutes, and a suspicious foreigner is running the New Dawn cult from his

sinister bookshop. Jason, meanwhile, has landed in a desolate landscape where he has to cope with the Queen of the Charrl, an insect race that eats mammals. (For some reason the contents of the Charrl larder is supposed to come as a surprise.) At worst, *Birthright* is a silly story about insects wanting to take over the world – and this is not helped by the irritating Charrl voices. At best, it is a *Strand* story come to life, and adds considerably to the overall momentum of the trilogy. Incidentally, it is firmly established here that the plays do not follow the same sequence as the books on which they are based.

In all these plays, Bernice is a comic-book heroine having comic-book adventures. It is partly because of this that *Just War*, the last of the trilogy, makes for such uncomfortable listening – Bernice hits reality with a resounding smack. Based on the equally powerful novel by Lance Parkin, it sees Bernice stranded in Guernsey in 1941. With Nazis occupying British soil, and the Allies' outlook seeming very bleak, Bernice has to remind herself that this is actual history, even if it resembles some nightmarish parallel world. Lisa Bowerman's superb performance, together with some very effective incidental music, combine to maintain the intense atmosphere. This is the finest play in the range; excellent by any standard.

Customers who order the whole Time Ring Trilogy as a single purchase are also entitled to buy *Buried Treasures*, a limited edition single CD, for a further £9.99. This kicks off with "Making Myths" by Jac Rayner, a piece of infantile drivel that should never have been released. Paul Cornell is interviewed, and is revealed to have an audiogenic voice – perhaps he should be contributing to the range in that capacity. His short play "Closure" follows, which deals with war-time atrocities. It's preachy, and lacks the subtlety of *Just War*, but it is thought-provoking, and has a satisfying ending.

Despite one or two serious shortcomings – notably in the humour department – Big Finish have produced a worthy, professional range. It's not great sf, but it's very involving and highly entertaining. And despite recently acquiring the rights to produce original *Doctor Who*, they have announced their intention to continue with the Bernice range – a move which is to be applauded.

All the plays apart from *Buried Treasures* are on double CD and are available for £12.99 from Big Finish Productions Ltd, PO Box 1127, Maidenhead, Berks SL6 3LN.

**Paul Beardsley**

## Audio SF

*Paul Beardsley*

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and harrar titles, and baaks af related interest, received by Interzone during the manth specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end af each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from baak covers rather than title pages. A listing here does nat preclude a separate review in this issue (ar in a future issue) af the magazine.

Allston, Aaron. **Star Fighters of Adumar: X-Wing, Book Nine.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-81271-8, 292pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1999.) 9th September 1999.

Barclay, James. **Dawnthief: Chronicles of the Raven, Book 1.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-S94-X, 416pp, C-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this appears to be a debut novel by a new [?] British writer, but the publishers go light on confirming that or on telling us anything about him; he may have a gaming background [the title has the ring of a Weis & Hickman novel, hasn't it?].) 29th July 1999.

Barron, Neil, ed. **Fantasy and Horror: A Critical and Historical Guide to Literature, Illustration, Film, TV, Radio, and the Internet.** Scarecrow Press, ISBN 0-8108-3596-7, xii+816pp, hardcover, £76.50. (Primary and secondary bibliographical and critical guide to the fields of fantasy and horror; first published in the USA, 1999; this is the American edition with a British price added, distributed in the UK by Shelwing Ltd, 127 Sandgate Rd., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BH; this wonderful tome, which deserves to be shelved beside Clute & Grant's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* [1997], is a combination and extensive update of two earlier books by Barron, *Fantasy Literature: A Reader's Guide* and *Harrar Literature: A Reader's Guide* [both published by Garland, 1990]; contributors of whole chapters include Neil Barron, Stefan Dziemianowicz, Steve Eng, Frederick S. Frank, Darren Harris-Fain, Michael Klossner, Brian Stableford, Gary K. Wolfe and others; highly recommended.) 21st October 1999.

Baxter, Stephen. **Moonseed.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-649813-2, 535pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1998; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzane* 136.) 2nd August 1999.

Beagle, Peter S. **The Magician of Karakosk and Other Stories.** Souvenir Press, ISBN 0-285-63504-2, xii+269pp, B-format paperback, cover by Matthew Williams, £9.99. (Fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1997; it contains a three-page Foreword and six stories set in the world of the author's last novel, *The Innkeeper's Sang* – Beagle seems a bit shame-faced about this in his prefatory remarks, stating: "I don't write sequels... I don't do prequels either... Most particularly, I don't create epic trilogies...") 26th August 1999.

Besher, Alexander. **Chi.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-859-1, xi+306pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £6.99. (Sf novel, first

published in 1999; third in the "Rim" series.) 5th August 1999.

Bester, Alfred. **The Demolished Man.** "SF Masterworks, 14." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-822-1, 250pp, B-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1953; another good addition to the Millennium series of classic sf; unfortunately the publishers have not sent us review copies of "SF Masterworks" nos. 11 and 12, which were *Last and First Men* by Olaf Stapledon and *Earth Abides* by George R. Stewart.) 22nd July 1999.

Bouzereau, Laurent, and Jody Duncan. **The Making of Episode I: The Phantom Menace.** "Star Wars." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-43119-7, xii+164pp, large-format paperback, \$19.95. (Heavily illustrated account of the making of George Lucas's recent blockbusting sf movie in the *Star Wars* series; first edition.) Late entry: 21st May publication, received in July 1999.

Bova, Ben. **Return to Mars.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97640-4, 404pp, hardcover, cover by Gregory Bridges, \$25. (Sf novel, first edition; sequel to *Mars* [1992].) Late entry: 8th June publication, received in July 1999.

Brooks, Terry. **Angel Fire East.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-37964-0, 338pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; third in the "urban fantasy" trilogy which began with *Running with the Deman* and *A Knight of the Ward*.) October 1999.

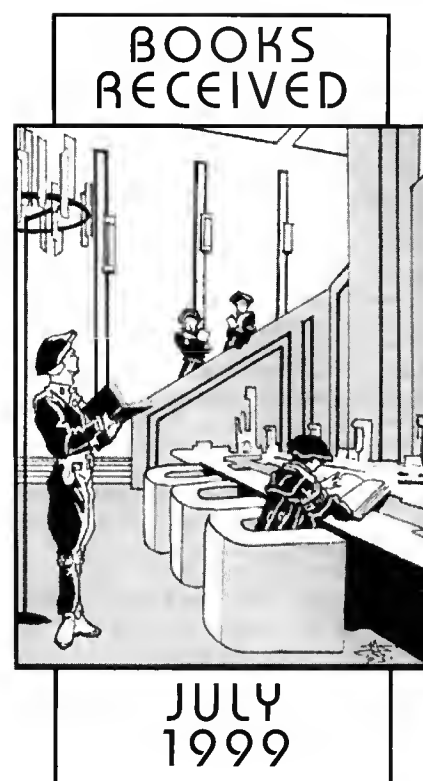
Brooks, Terry. **A Knight of the Word.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-738-2, 421pp, hardcover, cover by Brom, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; sequel to *Running with the Deman*.) 26th August 1999.

Claremont, Chris, and George Lucas. **Shadow Star: Third in the Chronicles of the Shadow War.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-09598-6, 467pp, hardcover, cover likely to be by Ciruelo Cabral, \$24.95. (Sharecrop fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; like the previous two volumes, it seems to have been written entirely by Claremont, although based on a concept by Lucas and copyrighted "Lucasfilm Ltd.") 9th November 1999.

Clemens, James. **Wit'ch Storm.** "Book Two of *The Banned and the Banished*." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-41707-0, 484pp, trade paperback, cover by Brom, \$13.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it's copyright Jim Czajkowski, and is the second novel of a new American writer, born 1961.) Late entry: 6th May publication, received in July 1999.

Cook, Robin. **Toxin.** "Food-borne illness – our latest nightmare." Pan, ISBN 0-330-36899-0, 437pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1998.) 16th July 1999.

Cook, Robin. **Vector.** "Bioterrorism – the latest urban nightmare." Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-76583-4, 435pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the



USA, 1999; since the success of his novel *Cama* in the 1970s, Dr Cook has continued churning out these bio-medical thrillers, some of them more science-fictional than others; many get made into TV movies.) 16th July 1999.

Danvers, Dennis. **End of Days.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97448-7, 372pp, small-format hardcover, \$16. (Sf novel, first edition; the author [born 1947] is known for his werewolf novel *Wilderness* [1991], which was made into a television serial; this one is a follow-up to his first sf novel, *Circuit of Heaven* [1998].) Late entry: 8th June publication, received in July 1999.

Delacorte, Peter. **Time on My Hands.** Phoenix, ISBN 0-75380-838-2, 397pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; pitched at the mainstream audience, it concerns time-travel into the past in an attempt to change political history; it was shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award following its first UK publication in 1998.) 22nd July 1999.

Dick, Philip K. **Martian Time-Slip.** "SF Masterworks, 13." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-837-X, 226pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1964; this was scarcely noticed when it first appeared in 1964, but has come to be seen as one of Dick's very best.) 22nd July 1999.

Ferman, Edward L., and Gordon Van Gelder, eds. **The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction: The Fiftieth Anniversary Anthology.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86973-8, 381pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; SO



years! – our heartiest congratulations to F&SF; despite its subtitle, though, this anthology consists only of stories reprinted from the magazine's past five years or so [earlier material would have been over-familiar]; authors include Terry Bisson, Michael Blumlein, Ray Bradbury, John Crowley, Bradley Denton, Paul Di Filippo, Harlan Ellison, Esther M. Friesner, Elizabeth Hand, Tanith Lee, Ursula Le Guin, Maureen F. McHugh, Rachel Pollack, Robert Reed, Bruce Sterling, Kate Wilhelm and Gene Wolfe, among others; recommended.) *October 1999.*

Ferns, Chris. **Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature.** "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies, 19." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-604-6, xii+268pp, C-format paperback, cover by Frances Dorsey, £14.95. (Critical study of utopian fiction from Thomas More to the present day; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £32 [not seen]; this looks to be a solid and intelligent book on its subject, one which is of vital importance to the emergence of sf as a genre [arguably, utopian fiction is science fiction, and it was "invented" in 1516, by More]; Chris Ferns [about whom we're told nothing, though he/she seems to be a Canadian academic] takes a long view, dealing in some detail with such writers as Campanella, Bacon, Bellamy, Morris, Wells, Huxley, Orwell – and on through to Le Guin and others; our first, superficial, criticisms would be twofold: [a] in a work which covers *dystopias* [bad places] as well as *eutopias* [good places] there is insufficient attention given to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* [1726; for an account which does stress the centrality of that great work see Christine Rees's *Utopian Imagination and Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (1996) – not mentioned in this book's bibliography, alas]; and [b] yet again, the crucial historical importance of Louis-Sebastien Mercier's *L'An 2440* [1771], the first utopia to be set in future time, is slighted [it gets a passing mention in a footnote] – see Paul K. Alkon's *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* [1987] and Robert Darnton's *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* [1996] for accounts of that book [again, those two studies are not listed in this one's bibliography].) *July 1999.*

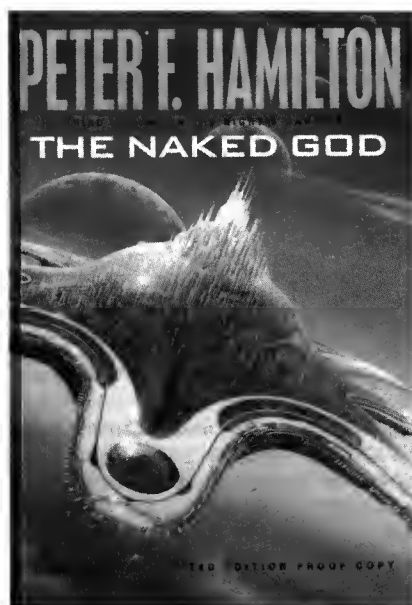
Filippini, Serge. **The Man in Flames.** Translated by Liz Nash. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-24-0, 367pp, B-format paperback, cover by David Bird, £10.99. (Historical novel-of-ideas, first published in France, 1990; its the imaginary autobiography of the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno, who was burnt at the stake in 1600 for his heretical scientific and religious beliefs; the author was born in 1950, and this is one of six novels he has written; the publishers describe it as "a major critical and commercial success throughout Europe.") *12th August 1999.*

Gibson, William. **All Tomorrow's Parties.** Viking, ISBN 0-670-87557-0, 278pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; proof copy received [a photocopy of an American set of proofs labelled "G. P. Putnam's"]; set in the same future world as the author's last two novels, *Virtual Light* and

*Ildoru*; it's a pity Gibson has chosen the same title, "All Tomorrow's Parties," as was used by Paul J. McAuley for a short story in *Interzone* 119 [May 1997 – since reprinted in various anthologies].) *October 1999.*

Grant, Richard. **Kaspian Lost.** Avon/Spike, ISBN 0-380-97672-2, 313pp, hardcover, \$24. (Fantasy novel, first edition; about a boy who goes missing, and the strange things that happen to him during his 96 hours away.) *Late entry: 8th June publication, received in July 1999.*

Green, Simon R. **Deathstalker Destiny.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-877-9, 473pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Mennim, £6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; the fifth "Deathstalker" space opera, it's blurred as "the triumphant conclusion of the bestselling epic"; old-fashioned, unpretentious, done with a certain flair that is sometimes reminiscent of Edmond Hamilton [or of Michael Moorcock emulating Hamilton in *The Sundered Worlds* (1965)]: "Among the dust of forgotten suns, in a darkness that no longer knew the light and life of stars, Owen Deathstalker and Hazel d'Ark came again to the Wolfing World...") *29th July 1999.*



Hamilton, Peter F. **The Naked God: Book Three of the Night's Dawn Trilogy.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-68791-4, 1174pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £20. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; another whopper, the final doorstep of three – completing well over 3,000 pages of adventure-some, mystically-tinged space opera; this proof copy is itself described as "a special signed, limited edition," no. 13 of 550.) *8th October 1999.*

Harrison, Harry. **The Stainless Steel Rat Joins the Circus.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86934-7, 269pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the latest Slippery Jim diGriz adventure.) *November 1999.*

Heinlein, Robert A. **The Fantasies of Robert A. Heinlein.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87245-3, 352pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy

collection, first edition; proof copy received; eight familiar stories, mostly from the 1940s, selected by David G. Hartwell to represent the more fantastic side of Heinlein's imagination; although the obvious items [mostly from *Unknown* magazine], such as the novellas "Magic, Inc." and "The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag," are here, so are a few stories which traditionally have been taken as sf rather than fantasy – "And He Built a Crooked House," "Waldo" and "All You Zombies" [if those are to be redefined as fantasy, though, it would have been equally easy to make a case for certain other stories, such as "The Year of the Jackpot," which are not included here]; perhaps this sort of repackaging is necessary in a time when science fiction has lost much of its "charm" in the public eye and fantasy rules the roost.) *November 1999.*

Hewson, David. **Solstice.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-651008-6, 488pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf thriller, first published in 1998; it concerns sunspots and near-future global disaster, and is marketed for the mainstream; the author is described as a columnist for the *Sunday Times*, and this is his third novel.) *2nd August 1999.*

Howson, Jock. **2020: Hindsight.** Howson [Traikal Strand, Goat's Path, Bantry, Co. Cork, Ireland], ISBN 0-9536141-0-7, 466pp, small-press paperback, £6.95. (Sf novel, first edition; subtitled "An Eyewitness Account of the Collapse of Society in the British Isles in the Post-Millennial Period," it's supposedly told by an Indian academic of the 22nd century; the front cover carries an alternative subtitle, "The Book of the Bug"; this is presumably the self-published debut novel of an Irish writer – but he tells us nothing of himself.) *No date shown: received in July 1999.*

Jeter, K. W. **Hard Merchandise: The Bounty Hunter Wars, Book Three.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50687-0, 338pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Youll, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1999.) *12th August 1999.*

Jordan, Robert, and Teresa Patterson. **The World of Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-744-7, 304pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Ellisa Mitchell, £12.50. (Copiously illustrated companion to the series of fantasy novels by Jordan; first published in the USA, 1997; the artwork is by Todd Cameron Hamilton, John M. Ford, Tom Canty, Darrell K. Sweet and others; this is a Bill Fawcett & Associates packaged book; "Robert Jordan" is a pseudonym of James Rigney, Jr.; it seems to be a straight reissue of the 1997 UK hardcover edition with the price halved [it was originally £25].) *26th August 1999.*

Kerr, Katharine. **The Black Raven: Book Two of The Dragon Mage.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37950-X, 331pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; proof copy received; follow-up to *The Red Wyvern*, and second in a new quintet of the "Devery" sequence.) *9th November 1999.*

Kerr, Philip. **The Second Angel.** "The thriller of the future." Orion, ISBN 0-75282-686-7, 432pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1998; another one for the mainstream market [no mention of sf], by an author – the British Michael Crichton – who has utilized sf themes many times before [A *Philosophical Investigation*, *Gridiran*, *Esau*, etc]; it appears to be pure science fiction, opening in a colony on the moon in the year 2069; in fact, it's absolutely laced with generic references – first sentence: "It was another bright, cold day on the Moon and the atomic clocks were flashing 300" [pastiche of the opening of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*] – first character, introduced on page two, named "Cavor" [reference to Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*]; can we have our genre back, please, Mr Kerr?; we hadn't heard of this book until now, but it seems to have received good reviews in hardcover last year [even from the *Literary Review*, which professes never to review sf: they had a joke, relayed to us at second-hand, about their "SF Editor" being the wastebin]; like several of Kerr's novels, this one is "in development for film," but we're getting a bit tired of hearing that by now.) 5th August 1999.

Kress, Nancy. **Beaker's Dozen.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86843-X, 352pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Sf collection, first published in 1998; it contains, as the title implies, 13 stories, all reprints of the 1990s, mostly from Asimov's *SF* and *Omni*; among them is her well-known novella "Beggars in Spain" [1991], which formed the basis of a whole trilogy of novels.) 4th August 1999.

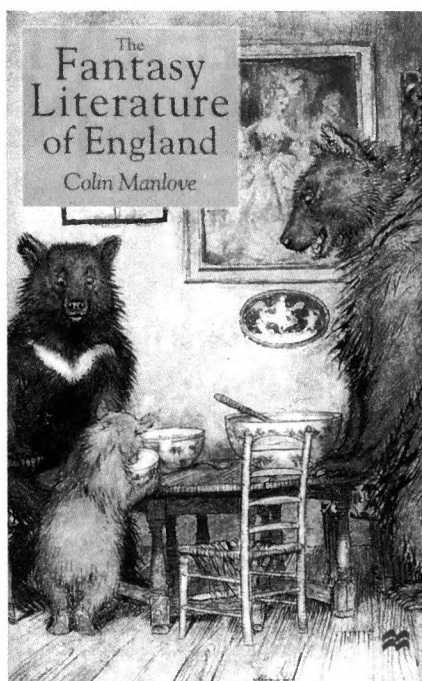
Kress, Nancy. **Yanked!** "David Brin's Out of Time." Avon, ISBN 0-380-79968-S, 246pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Bollinger & Cliff Nielsen, \$4.99. (Young-adult sharecrop sf novel, first edition; the opening of a time-travel adventure series "created by" David Brin; future books in the series will be written by Sheila Finch and Roger McBride Allen.) Late entry. 8th June publication, received in July 1999.

Lackey, Mercedes, and Larry Dixon. **Owl-sight.** Illustrated by Dixon. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-845-0, 389pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; sequel to *Owlflight*.) 29th July 1999.

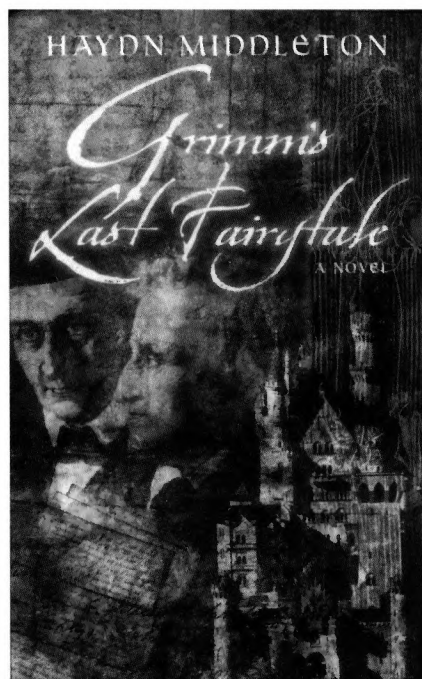
Lawhead, Stephen. **The Iron Lance: The Celtic Crusades, Book I.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648321-6, 582pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in 1998.) 16th August 1999.

Levinson, Paul. **The Silk Code.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86823-S, 319pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a hard-sf/crime crossover; the author is an *Analog* writer, and this is his debut novel; it appears to be a fix-up of "The Mendelian Lamp Case" [April 1997] and other stories which first appeared in that magazine.) October 1999.

Manlove, Colin. **The Fantasy Literature of England.** Macmillan Press, ISBN 0-333-73019-



4, vi+222pp, hardcover, cover by Arthur Rackham, £45. (Critical study of English fantasy, first edition; Manlove has previously written *Scottish Fantasy: A Critical Survey* [Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994], among many other books; in this volume he attempts to redress the balance by looking at the specifically English fantasy tradition – although, since the book begins with some mention of King Arthur and the "Matter of Britain," and later goes on to include discussion of such writers as Arthur Machen and Kenneth Morris, there seems to be some confusion about the status of the Welsh [perhaps the title should have included the words "and Wales"]; it's divided thematically, with chapters on "Secondary World Fantasy," "Metaphysical Fantasy," "Comic Fantasy" and so on; as usual with Manlove, it's well-writ-



ten and continually interesting, but it covers such a vast subject-matter, from Chaucer to Terry Pratchett, from Shakespeare to Phillip Pullman, that inevitably at times it reads like a descriptive jog-trot rather than an in-depth analysis.) August 1999.

Middleton, Haydn. **Grimm's Last Fairytale: A Novel.** Abacus, ISBN 0-349-11120-0, 249pp, C-format paperback, cover by Mark Preston, £9.99. (Historical novel, first edition; this is of interest because it's a novel based on the lives of two of the greatest "fantasy writers" – the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm; it looks to be worthwhile for anyone who is intrigued by the origins of fairy tales.) 12th August 1999.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Adiamante.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-842-7, 316pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Murphy, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; an adventure novel-of-ideas about the human war-instinct versus pacifism, set in Earth's future.) 5th August 1999.

Moon, Elizabeth. **Sporting Chance: Book Two of The Serrano Legacy.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-882-6, 383pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 5th August 1999.

Murphy, Pat. **There and Back Again, by Max Merriwell.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86644-S, 301pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition, proof copy received; it's described in the accompanying publicity letter as "pure adventure, a space opera of the old style with a modern sensibility.") October 1999.

Murray, Terry A. **Science Fiction Magazine Story Index, 1926-1995.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0691-7, ix+627pp, hardcover, £85.00. (Issue-by-issue listing of the fiction contents of all American sf magazines through 1995, cross-indexed by author and by story-title; first published in the USA, 1999; this is the American edition with a British price added, distributed in the UK by Shelwing Ltd, 127 Sandgate Rd., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BH; it represents a big labour of love on the part of its compiler, but we can't feel warm to this book because of its blithe omission of all British magazines – not only *Interzone* [from 1982] but also such historically important publications as *New Worlds* [1946-1970] and *Science Fantasy* [1950-1966]; moreover, and sadly for the author and publisher, it's a volume which was rendered obsolete even while it was in production: it contains nothing which cannot be found, in fuller, more accurate and more "manipulable" form, and more cheaply, in the CD-Rom *Science Fiction, Fantasy, & Weird Fiction Magazine Index (1890-1997)* by Stephen T. Miller & William G. Contento [this latter available from Locust Press, PO Box 1330S, Oakland, CA 94661, USA]; Terry Murray's index will be useful for those without computers or CD-Rom drives – or for all of us in times of power-cuts or the general crash of civilization; assuming the power stays on, though, and you have access to the equipment, the Miller & Contento CD is much the better buy.) 22nd November 1999.





Pierce, Tamora. **Wild Magic: The Immortals, 1**. Scholastic/Point, ISBN 0-439-01069-1, 344pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; Point have also sent us simultaneous reprints of the subsequent three novels in the series, *Wolf-Speaker* [1993], *The Emperor Mage* [1994] and *Realms of the Gods* [1996], all priced at £3.99 each.) July 1999.

Pratchett, Terry. **The Fifth Elephant**. Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-40995-8, 313pp, hardcover, cover by Josh Kirby, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the 24th "Discworld" novel, it features "dwarfs, diplomacy, intrigue and big lumps of fat.") 11th November 1999.

Reichert, Mickey Zucker. **The Children of Wrath: The Renshai Chronicles, Part Two** [sic: it's actually volume three]. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-563-X, 576pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; follow-up to *Beyond Rognorok* and *Prince of Demans*; "Mickey Zucker Reichert" is the form of her name used by American doctor and writer Miriam S. Zucker.) 22nd July 1999.

Roessner, Michaela. **The Stars Compel**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85755-1, 430pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *The Stars Dispose* [1997]; despite the "starry" titles, these books are not sf but fantasies set in Renaissance Italy.) October 1999.

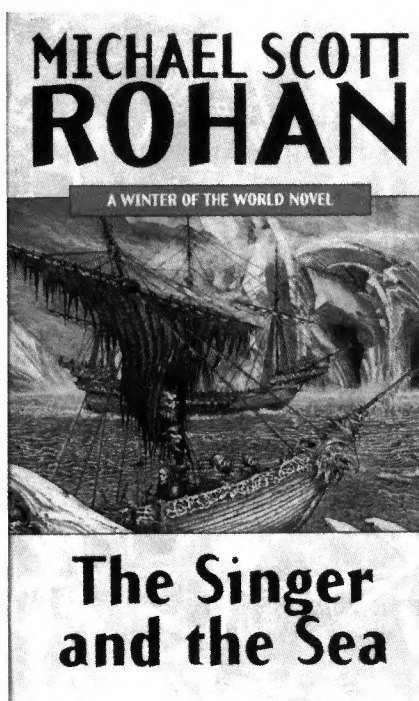
Rohan, Michael Scott. **The Singer and the Sea: A Winter of the World Novel**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-741-2, 419pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ian Miller, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a follow-up to *The Castle of the Winds* [1998].) 5th August 1999.

Routley, Jane. **Aramaya**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79428-4, 278pp, trade paperback, cover by Donato, \$13.50. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; the author is Australian, currently living in Denmark; Avon do not claim it as a first edition, so it's possible this book, which is a sequel to *Mage Heart* and *Fire Angels*, had a prior Australian appearance.) Late entry: June publication, received in July 1999.

Sheffield, Charles. **Starfire**. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37894-5, 401pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it looks to be a follow-up to his disaster novel *Aftermath* [1998]; incidentally, there already has been an sf novel called *Starfire* – it was by Paul Preuss [1988].) 9th November 1999.

Spinrad, Norman. **Greenhouse Summer**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86799-9, 317pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author's first new sf work in some time, described as being about "ecology, international politics, the media, and young passion.") November 1999.

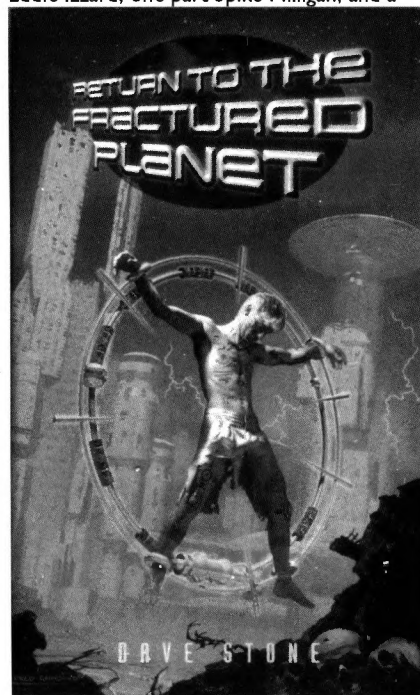
Stableford, Brian. **Architects of Emortality**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87207-0, 319pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; an expansion of the novella



"The Flowers of Evil" [Asimov's, October 1994], it features a central character called Oscar Wilde.) November 1999.

Stone, Dave. **Return to the Fractured Planet**. "The New Adventures." Virgin/NA, ISBN 0-426-20534-0, x+238pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first edition; it features the galactic adventures of Bernice Summerfield [a former associate of Doctor Who], created by Paul Cornell.) 19th August 1999.

Walker, Stephen. **Danny Yates Must Die**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648380-1, 322pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book by a new British writer, it's described as "two parts Eddie Izzard, one part Spike Milligan, and a



dash of Salvador Dali for good measure.") 16th August 1999.

Williams, Sean. **Metal Fatigue**. Swift Publishers [PO Box 1436, Sheffield S17 3XP], ISBN 1-874082-29-4, 392pp, hardcover, cover by Greg Bridges, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in Australia, 1996; Aurealis Award winner; reviewed by Gwyneth Jones in *Interzone* 116; this is the first British, and first world hardcover, edition.) 4th August 1999.

Willis, Connie. **Miracle and Other Christmas Stories**. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-11111-6, viii+ 328pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; eight stories, presumably reprints, all of which have Yuletide themes in one way or another; there is also an introduction, an afterword and two appendices – headed "Twelve Terrific Things to Read at Christmas," "And Twelve to Watch"; good grief, the note on the author tells us that she has won a total of six Hugo Awards and six Nebula Awards, "more than any other science fiction writer"; yet, for all that, she remains fairly obscure outside her own circle of pals [nobody seems to publish her in Britain any more], which just goes to show how in-group the awards are becoming – not that we mean to imply Willis is an untalented writer: maybe this book, which seems to be pitched at a wider, Christmas-loving readership, will enable her to break out, to get free of all those awards which hang around her neck like chains...) 9th November 1999.

Wilson, Robert Charles. **Bios**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86857-X, 208pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the latest by the author whose last novel, *Darwinia* [1998], was described by one Canadian newspaper as being "in the best tradition of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells" – no less.) November 1999.

Winding, Terri, and Delia Sherman, eds. **The Essential Bordertown: A Traveller's Guide to the Edge of Faerie**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86703-4, 383pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Shared-world fantasy anthology, first published in 1998; a sequel volume to the earlier "Borderland" series of anthologies and novels conceived by Terri Winding, it contains all-new stories in "elfpunk" mode by Steven Brust, Charles de Lint, Ellen Kushner, Patricia A. McKillip, Felicity Savage, Delia Sherman, Midori Snyder, Caroline Stevermer and several others.) 8th July 1999.

Wolfe, Gene. **On Blue's Waters: Volume One of The Book of the Short Sun**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86614-3, 381pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; first part of a trilogy which is itself a follow-up to the tetralogy "The Book of the Long Sun" – described by Kim Stanley Robinson as "one of the great long science fiction novels ever written"; the publishers inform us that the remaining two novels, *In Green's Jungles* and *Return to the Wharf*, are already completed and will appear in 2000.) October 1999.



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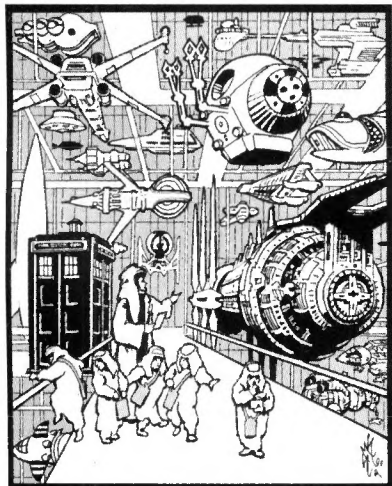
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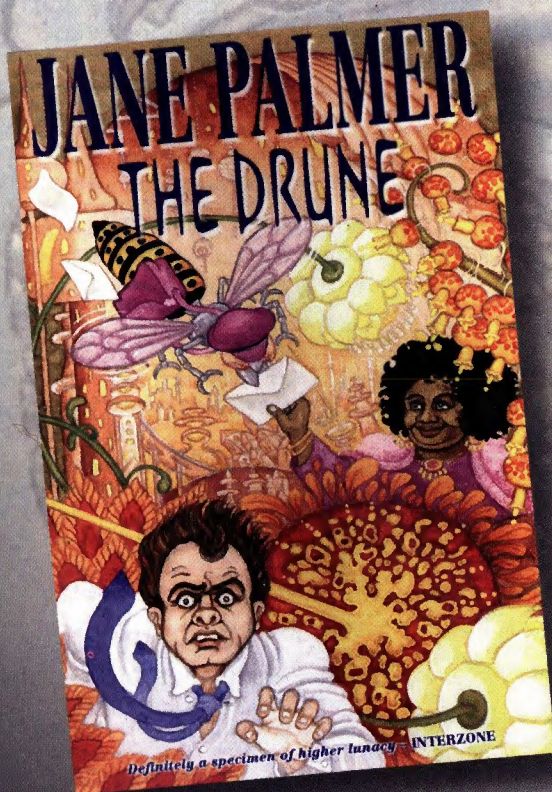


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